

# **School Violence in America: Motivation, History and the Need for Change**

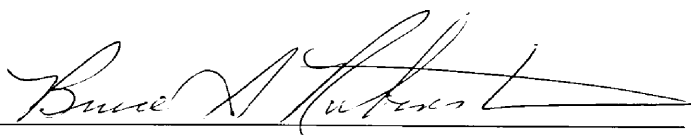
**By**

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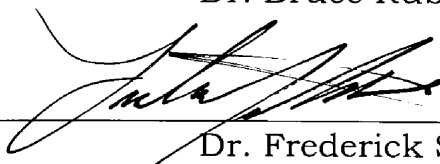
June 23, 2000

First Reader

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Bruce Rubenstein", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Bruce Rubenstein

Second Reader

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Frederick Svoboda", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Frederick Svoboda

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## **Introduction**

It was a cool, cloudy spring day, but the sun shone brightly in my heart. Just moments before I had watched my son come into this world. As I stood over him and called his name, those magnetic blue eyes opened and looked for the first time at me, for the first time at anyone. From that instant forward I knew it was my responsibility to ensure that no harm ever came to him. I had to guarantee him a happy, healthy life, and that he would live on for many joyous years beyond my passing. It was a feeling that most first-time parents experience, even though it is a facade that many will never acknowledge as such. With the exception of the occasional bloody nose or broken limb, most will never have to face the fact that serious harm or the loss of a child can come so easily, so unexpectedly, and despite our best efforts to the contrary.

For the parents of Diane Collins of Lynnville, Tennessee, that reality hit on November 15, 1995 in Richland High School. That is the day that Jamie Rouse came to school with a rifle. That is the day that he planned “to shoot teachers.” That is the day that Diane “just got in the way.”<sup>1</sup> That is the day that a sixteen-year old girl’s death shattered the hopes of her parents. She would not outlive them. She would not grow to be an adult and fulfill her potential in life. Her life ended unexpectedly

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<sup>1</sup> The American School Board Journal, “Yet another fatal shooting rips a school,” January, 1996, pg. 4-5.

and violently. It happened in a place that her parents probably thought was safe: a school.

While many of us have fond adolescent memories of school, and hopes for the same experience for our children, the reality for many students today is one of fear and violence. In 1996-97, forty-seven percent of public schools reported crimes to the police that involved physical attacks or fights without a weapon, theft/larceny and vandalism. Of even greater concern is that ten percent of public schools reported at least one serious violent crime to police which included murder, rape or other type of sexual battery, suicide, physical attack or fight with a weapon, or robbery.<sup>2</sup> In more than 130 cases between 1993 and 1997<sup>3</sup>, students encountered the same fate as Diane Collins, and their future was lost in the very place that was supposed to prepare them for that future.

As a parent who will some day send a child into the potential perils of the public school system, I want to put my mind at ease. Parents need to know if the highly publicized violent tragedies experienced in recent

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Departments of Justice and Education, *Annual Report on School Safety: 1998*, October 1998, pg. VI.

<sup>3</sup> National School Safety Center (NSSC) – In-House Report, 1998. NSSC reported 131 school-related deaths from 1993 to 1997 that were verified by newspaper accounts. NSSC states in their report that this is probably an underestimation of the total school-related deaths because not all accounts are reported to them or in newspaper clippings that reach them. They also stated that this is not a scientific study. There has only been one scientific study done on school-related deaths, which was reported in *JAMA*. In that report, 105 school-associated deaths were identified during a two-year period from 1992 to 1994. Kachur, et al, *School-Associated Violent Deaths in the United States, 1992 to 1994*, *JAMA*, June 12, 1996 – Vol. 275, No. 22.

years across the country are an anomaly or a trend toward a more dangerous school environment. The goal of this thesis is to take a look at where our schools have come from and where they are going as it relates to violence. It will look at the history of violence in the schools and in this country, and examine the factors behind the violent behavior, and motivations of those perpetrating these crimes. It will also explore what has been done or will be done by the institutions which are in the best position to keep our kids from harm and alive. It will also either put parents' minds at ease or put fear in their heart.

## **Personal Note**

On March 24, 1998, I was riding in my car on the way to some work related appointment when the news broke on the radio about the shooting in Jonesboro, Arkansas. Still today I recall my feelings when I found out that the killers were only thirteen and eleven years old. Shock is the only word to describe what I felt. I was shocked and confused. I asked myself “how could such young children gun down their fellow classmates and a teacher?” My shock and confusion convinced me to try to find an answer. As more information trickled in throughout the day, I decided that I would focus this thesis on the issue of these deadly school shootings.

Almost two years later, in practically my own backyard, a six-year-old girl was shot and killed by another six-year-old in their classroom. The youngest victim and the youngest killer since the school shooting blood baths began. While my friends, family, colleagues and the rest of the nation were left dazed by this horrifying incident, I was feeling much different emotions. After spending more than a year and half reading and writing about these school shootings I was unable to be shocked by it. I was sad, I felt empathy for the child’s family and to a greater extent I was angry at those who have talked a good game about preventing such tragedies, but who had once again failed.

However, of all the emotions I felt, shock was not one of them. In the process of writing this thesis I believe I have become somewhat desensitized to the increasingly violent incidents occurring in this country's schools. My fear is that I may not be alone in this feeling. I dread the thought that the more these incidents occur, the less likely we as a society will be to consider it the most horrible catastrophe ever to strike the United States school system. Much like we have moved away from finding increasing violence, swearing and nudity in the mainstream media inappropriate, will death in schools become a more common and more widely accepted occurrence? Will we as a society concede that the frequent loss of a student at the hands of another student is just a part of doing the job of education? I pray that our society will not slip to those depths, and that we are able to come together to find the answers and stop killing.

## **Chapter One: A History of Violence**

Many in this country would like to believe that the United States was a nation founded by people who were religiously idealistic, searching for a utopia across the water and wanting nothing more than to love one another without malice or ill-will. We are a nation which often deludes ourselves into believing that throughout our history we have unwaveringly maintained this altruistic sense of purpose and did so without having a violent blemish on our historical record. How often will you hear a neighbor, friend, or relative ponder a recent violent tragedy, scratching their head in wonder as to how our country got to this point. They will tell you that the streets were safer when they were young, that their parents never locked the doors when they went to bed at night, and that the kind of violence we see today is new, never seen in our society before.

While a great many people continue to cling to the belief that things were better in the “old days,” the reality of our nation’s violent history is clear. Not only is violence woven throughout our history, but also the very formation of the country was centered on violence, as we gained our independence in an often-brutal battle with England. Since then this country has fought exceedingly violent wars both at home and



abroad that have left 1,135,754 citizens dead.<sup>4</sup> Yet again, people will put the scars of battle aside, denying that the violence of war is nothing more than a necessary evil in defending our country. When pressed for an answer as to why the United States has engaged in conflicts that were not directly in defense of our soil, they state that we had to protect our interests, or those of nations unable to protect themselves, from a powerful invader. In fact, it is a common theme in our society to declare war a positive part of our culture, stating that Americans are providing a noble service as the world's "policeman."

The wars Americans have endeavored to sanctify as heroic are just a small part of our country's violent traditions. Throughout American history, there has been a glorification of violence through song, folk tale, written word and now the modern mediums. The efforts of people trying to do nothing more than make a quick buck have provided the "average" American with larger than life mythological heroes whose only mission is to rescue this nation from man, beast or nature through violent means. Instead of merely entertaining this country with the creation of fiction, the profiteers of past and present have done much worse. They have sanctified the acceptability of violence at any cost. Now Americans must

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<sup>4</sup> *World Almanac and Book of Facts 1998*, page 161. World Almanac Books, Mahawah, N.J., 1997.

acknowledge and deal with the reality “that myths reach out of the past to cripple, incapacitate, [and] strike down the living.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet the violence of America’s past is not just mythology. In the book *American Violence: A Documentary History*, Richard Hofstadter provides detailed accounts of more than a hundred major violent episodes that have occurred over a two hundred fifty year time period in America. These cases represent some of the major violent incidents that shook the foundation of the country and left historical scars on the nation’s psyche. A few examples of the types of violent episodes include the following:

- Political Violence (i.e. the Boston Massacre of 1770 and the Baltimore Election Riot of 1856)
- Economic Violence (i.e. the Louisiana Sugar Strike of 1887 and the 1931 Chicago Eviction Riot)
- Religious and Ethnic Violence (i.e. the anti-Mormon Riot in 1838 and the Zoot-Suit Riot of 1943)
- Personal Violence (i.e. the Sand Bar Gun Battle in 1827 and the Gunfight at O.K Corral in 1881)
- Anti-Radical and Police Violence (i.e. May Day Riot in Cleveland in 1919 and the Chicago Democratic National Convention Riot in 1968)
- Assassinations, Terrorism and Political Murders (i.e. assassinations of U.S. Presidents and political and civil rights leaders)
- Racial Violence (i.e. slave revolts and uprisings in the 1800s and the Watts and Detroit riots of the 1960s)<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Slotkin, Richard: *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860*, page 5. Wesleyan University Press, Middleton, CT, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Hofstadter, Richard: *American Violence: A Documentary History*. pages IX to XIV. Random House, Inc., New York, N.Y., 1970. The examples given here are only a sample of the more than one hundred different events, assassinations and episodes of violence that Hofstadter chronicles in his book. The examples were provided to give the reader a diversity of incidents which have occurred. Additionally, Hofstadter’s book is only a small portion of cases of violence that has traumatically impacted the history of the United States.

Hofstadter's efforts to graphically depict the heritage of violence in American society are only a snapshot of the brutal, often barbarous, actions of a nation and its citizens struggling for survival. While he attempts to provide incidents that stand out as major or significant events in America's violent past, there are most likely hundreds or thousands of equal or lesser cases of a violent nature that have helped shape our nation's bloody past. Additionally, there are undoubtedly multiple daily incidents of violence throughout America's history that manifest themselves in the form of physical encounters between individuals.

So why are Americans in denial about our violent history? There are a couple of explanations. The first, and most obvious, is that people have a natural tendency to push the negative aspects of life to the back of their consciousness. It is much easier to focus on the positive than the negative. Members of the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence have called this reaction "historical amnesia."<sup>7</sup> In addition, with the exception of wars, historians tend to avoid educating Americans on the violence of our past. Violence tends to be a diffuse issue which creates difficulty in building a teachable framework. While it would be an interesting, stimulating course that would require a multi-

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. Page 3.

disciplinary approach, it would be unusual to see a university offer a class on American violence.

Unfortunately, Americans' heightened awareness of violence in our society has been sparked more by the repeated current events than by our knowledge and conscious acknowledgement of our violent history. Even with a greater understanding of our savage past, these insights fall short of answering questions about why America has been a violent nation and why it continues to follow these deadly traditions. If one is a believer in the theory of Social Darwinism, violence is an inherent part of our nature as human beings. According to that theory, the strong survive, the weak either die or are subservient to the strong, and the division between the two is often created violently.

While there are some inborn tendencies towards violence in Americans because they are part of the human race, there are also so many contradictions in our culture that lead to frustrations and violence. These cultural ideals, like "monetary success, equality, freedom and democracy," create a feeling of lack of fulfillment and yearning on the part of those who do not, or are unable to achieve these treasured societal goals.<sup>8</sup> These feelings of disappointment and failure often lead to a backlash against society and the ultimate negative response to disappointment: violence.

Another factor in our history of violence stems from our break with the English common law of “duty to retreat.” This legal tenant is designed to place a person in the position of having to avoid a physical confrontation at all costs, or face the legal consequences of their actions. The only way one can claim self-defense in Great Britain is to be able to show that they did everything possible to flee a scene and “retreat to the wall at one’s back.” As Americans began to establish their own beliefs and values, legal and philosophical scholars began to chip away at the belief in “duty to retreat” as a form of cowardice and unsuited to the courage of an American. In the nineteenth century, we as a nation solidified our own common law doctrine of “no duty to retreat: that one was legally justified in standing one’s ground to kill in self-defense.” The U.S. Supreme Court, which acknowledged self-defense in 1921, hammered in the final federal legal nail in this matter.<sup>9</sup>

Although the legal and social acceptability of the concept of “no duty to retreat” is a contributor to violence, there are also a variety of cultural supports that provide a framework to the violent nature of America. The mass media continually pours violent images across our television screens until the fantasy becomes reality as both children and adults take to the streets and mimic what they have seen. There seems

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<sup>8</sup> Pinkney, Alphonso: *The American Way of Violence*, page 11. Random House, Inc., New York, N.Y., 1972.

to be no end to the proliferation of guns in our society as individuals and groups like the National Rifle Association continue to find ways to make it easier and cheaper to put weapons on the street despite the danger. While many will deny that the problem of racism still exists on a wide scale, the reality is racist sentiments are deeply imbedded in our culture and manifest themselves in both covert and overt racist violence. All of these cultural support factors combine to create an even deadlier society for Americans.<sup>10</sup>

Like violence in every setting in this country, our historical traditions and cultural shortcomings exacerbate violence in schools. In fact, the violence experienced in schools today may have some connection to mistakes made in addressing disturbances in the classroom during the beginning of the U.S. educational system. The earliest school violence was not that perpetrated by the students, but rather against the students. With a somewhat skewed thought process, heavy-handed teachers, who were encouraged to instill discipline in the classroom through excessive force and brutal means, controlled the first schools. These physical punishments, in combination with usually poor

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, Richard Maxwell: *No Duty to Retreat: Violence and Values in American History and Society*, pages 4-6. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, OK, 1994

<sup>10</sup> Pinkney, Alphonso: *The American Way of Violence*, chapter VI. Random House, Inc., New York, N.Y., 1972.

infrastructure and the overcrowding, led to increasing disorder and disturbances by the students.<sup>11</sup>

In early colonial times, the level of brutality by teachers was extreme considering the behaviors exhibited. It was not uncommon for a student to receive several lashes for minor offenses like “failing to bow to strangers or name-calling.”<sup>12</sup> While the whip was the most common means of punishing students, teachers would from time to time use “stocks, the pillory, and, occasionally, branding.”<sup>13</sup> As an example, the following is a list of punishments administered by a schoolmaster during his fifty years of teaching that ended in the early nineteenth century:

911,527 blows with a cane  
124,010 blows with a rod  
20,989 blows with a ruler  
136,715 blows with the hand  
12,235 blows on the mouth  
7,905 boxed ears  
1,115,800 raps on the head  
22,763 nota benes with Bible, grammar, or other books  
777 keeling on peas  
613 kneeling on a triangular block of wood<sup>14</sup>

In the mid-1800s, the cruelty of teachers continued, and older, bigger students began physically to fight back, so much so that the classroom required dominance by male teachers who could better handle the abuse. Parents became concerned about the welfare of their children

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<sup>11</sup> Counts, M. Reid and Crews, Gordon A.: *Evolution of School Disturbance in America*, chapters 2 and 3. Praeger, Westport, Connecticut, 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, page 33

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, page 36

as stories of harsh discipline began to filter home, and in some cases fights between parents and teachers would occur. As the behavior of both teachers and students held form into the early twentieth century, some mild reforms were being made that provided more structure in the classroom. New school buildings were erected with separate classrooms accommodating no more than fifty students, and emphasis was placed on controlling “animal impulses.” These improvements brought a welcomed sense of calmness for both the educator and pupil. In the 1930s the changes continued with the introduction of reformatories and disciplinary classrooms designed to remove the problem student so that the more studious could progress free from disturbance. The 1940s and 1950s saw little in the way of violent behavior. Corporeal punishment, still present in the classroom, was used more judiciously as education reform continued to move forward. School administrators and teachers spent most of their time during this period addressing issues of truancy, stealing, lying and temper tantrums.<sup>15</sup>

A major increase in crime in society as a whole as well as in the schools occurred during the 1960s and 1970s. The problem for schools reached a critical point in the mid-1970s, and it led to the development of a landmark study and report to the U.S. Congress in 1978 called *Violent Schools-Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to Congress*.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 45-46.



The three-part study was conducted in 1976-77 surveying 4,000 schools across the country. According to the study, 282,000 (1.3%) students a month were being physically attacked and approximately 2.4 million (11%) had something stolen from them every month. Six hundred thousand, or 3% of all students, reported that they were scared to go to school most of the time, and 1.6 million students (8%) had missed at least one day of school a month because they were afraid to be in school.<sup>16</sup>

For the most part, following the 1978 report to Congress, the issue of school violence was relegated to the back burner as people became distracted by other national issues, and the country's emotional center seemed to be desensitized to the malevolent nature of our schools' youth. As a nation and a school system the focus in the 1980s was the war on drugs. Juvenile correctional institutions quickly became filled with these new drug "criminals," and locker and student searches for drugs became a way of life in the schools.<sup>17</sup>

While the dilemma of drugs in schools got violent at times, it was still a relatively quiet decade comparatively speaking. The firestorm of attention was rekindled around the issue of violence during the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, chapters 4 and 5.

<sup>16</sup> *Violent Schools - Safe Schools: The Safe School Study Report to Congress*. Information from the National School Safety Center web site, <http://www.nssc1.org/studies/studies/nie.htm>

<sup>17</sup> Counts, M. Reid and Crews, Gordon A.: *Evolution of School Disturbance in America*, chapter 6. Prager, Westport, Connecticut, 1997.

beginning of the 1990s, and has only picked up steam. Our nation has refocused on the issue of school violence since the fairly recent trend of multiple killings in schools began with two murders in Langham Creek High School in Houston, Texas in 1992, and continued through the bloodiest school tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado in May, 1999.<sup>18</sup>

While violence has been a way of life in many aspects of American culture throughout our history, the fear of life threatening violence in the school system that has gripped school administrators, parents and students is a relatively recent phenomenon. While violent behavior has been and will be seen across every spectrum of American life, including the schools, the carnage experienced in our educational institutions in the last decade is unprecedented. Violence is a part of American tradition, but violent death has not been a tradition in the American school system.

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<sup>18</sup> Information from National School Safety Center web site, <http://www.nssc1.org/studies/studies/nie.htm>

## **Chapter Two: Why do they Kill?**

When the most recent violent death in a school occurs and is splashed across every form of media available for several days or weeks, the first question that people ask themselves is “what made that mere child kill?” Whether the death happens in our hometown or on the other side of the country, people will chat about this very question around the water cooler the next day or deliberate the issue with their neighbors as they are putting their own children on a bus to potential danger. They will shake their heads and wonder what went wrong in that youthful killer’s life. Newspaper editorials will question whether it was society, or even the school system itself, that created this adolescent monster. Americans will ask themselves, “what pitfalls do I as a parent need to avoid so that my child doesn’t end up taking another’s life?” What does a parent, teacher or school administrator look for in a child that would signal an impending mortal act against a classmate?

Much as a National Transportation Safety Board official will tell you that no single error causes a plane crash, the factors that lead up to the explosion of violence in a young person’s life are varied, complex and sometimes controversial. Beyond the triggers and contributing external factors leading to violence, there are also a number of psychosocial and

biological theoretical concepts associated with violent behaviors in children.

Before examining the causes, however, it is important to remember how serious the problem of violent death among children is in the United States. While some will argue that kids will be kids, and that “there were rough kids around when I was young too,” the reality is much different. In a study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the rates for murder and suicide for U.S. children under the age of fifteen have increased 300% between 1950 and 1993.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, when comparing violent youth deaths in the U.S. with other countries, the same study found that the U.S. is a frighteningly dangerous place for children. “American youngsters under the age of fifteen are twelve times more likely to die by intentional or accidental gunfire than their peers in other countries, five times more likely to be murdered, and twice as likely to commit suicide.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly youth violence in this country is a serious problem and has worsened in the latter half of this century.

It is important to clarify the difference between violence and other types of behavior like anger and aggression. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, violence is “physical force exerted for the purpose of

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<sup>19</sup> “U.S. Leads the World in Youth Violence,” *American School Board Journal*, April 1997, page 12.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

violating, damaging or abusing.” While aggression<sup>21</sup> and anger<sup>22</sup> can be contributors to violence, the two are neither necessarily causes nor automatically symptoms of impending violence. Aggressive and angry behavior in a child can be both positive and appropriate responses to certain situations if handled correctly.

Because there are so many potential factors that can lead to violent behavior, it is necessary to break them into three different groups: biological, psychological, and sociological. Each of these groups has various theories relating to delinquency and violence in young people. Additionally, there can be many specific substantive factors.

### **Sociological**

A “normal” reaction to social and societal pressures is the basis for the sociological perspectives of violence. While biological and psychological theories focus on an individual’s own defects or anomalies, sociological theories center on how individual’s environment creates a

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<sup>21</sup> According to Lorraine Wallach of the Erikson Institute, aggression is an “instinct [that] supplies the psychic energy necessary for maturation, learning and the exploration of the outside world. Aggression is neither good nor bad. It can help kids learn to read because it ignites curiosity.” While aggression usually is something positively generated for society, if it is not routed in the correct direction it can be spark that ignites violence. Lorraine Wallach: “Violence and Aggression in Today’s Schools,” *Educational Horizons*, Spring 1996, page 115.

<sup>22</sup> “Anger can be a natural and healthy response to trauma.” Most people respond to situations of anger in appropriate and healthy ways, and they even resolve difficult problems with anger, without it turning to violence. The body actually experiences physiological changes when a person becomes angry, and a rush of adrenaline occurs that can actually provide additional strength. Dale Ann D. Roper: “Facing Anger in Our Schools,” *Educational Horizons*, Summer 1998, page 363.

delinquent or violent person. These theories primarily fall within three categories: cultural, strain, and social control.<sup>23</sup>

In cultural theory it is believed that a subculture of violence is developed by learned behavior. Individuals will associate with a group of “bad apples” and they will take on the values and behaviors of the group. These values are typically exhibited in four ways: warrior values, excitement, fatalism, and autonomy. “First, Warrior values emphasize toughness, fearlessness, and skill in combat. Secondly, the group seeks out excitement to break up the monotony of everyday life.”<sup>24</sup> Thirdly, the group takes excessive risks because of their fatalistic beliefs, which are brought on by their inability to control or change the direction of their lives. Finally, they lack respect for authority and desire increased autonomy, which leads to an attitude that “no one is going to push me around.”<sup>25</sup>

Gangs are one of the largest contributing factors in the violent behavior of youth, and their existence can be connected to the cultural theory. While there are some variations on the definition of gangs, all the definitions have some similarities. Gangs tend to have juveniles who bond through some commonality like race, ethnicity, neighborhood, or

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<sup>23</sup> R. Barri Flowers: *The Adolescent Criminal*, page 124. McFarland & Company, Inc., Jefferson, N.C., 1990.

<sup>24</sup> D. Wayne Osgood, Editor: *Motivation and Delinquency*, page 180-181, James T. Tedeschi: “A Social Interactionist Interpretation of the Motives for Youth Violence.” University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, page 181.

ideology. Their main reason for existence and growth comes from a sense of belonging and the limited nature of other substantive relationships in their lives. Gangs usually are criminal in nature, but their violent activities tend to be directed toward other gangs in protection of the group or the group's "territory."<sup>26</sup>

Yet despite the gang focus, innocent individuals are some times caught in their violence. In a study of gang activity in the mid-1970s in four large metropolitan cities, nearly forty percent of all victims of gang violence were not members of a gang.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, thirty-one percent of all school deaths are gang-related.<sup>28</sup> Of even greater concern, the efforts of local, state and federal officials are not deterring gang activity. In a 1995 nationwide study, ninety-four percent of the communities surveyed stated that gang activity is staying the same or getting worse.<sup>29</sup>

In strain theory, the focus is on the conflict that arises between societal or cultural goals and existing barriers preventing an individual from achieving those goals. In order for a person in this position to reach those goals their only option is to commit criminal acts.<sup>30</sup> Robert Merton's theory of anomie, developed in the 1930s, stated that there are three conditions that will determine whether a person will be a criminal:

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<sup>26</sup> The Adolescent Criminal, page 98-99.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, page 100.

<sup>28</sup> "Gangs Figure Large in School Violence," *American School Board Journal*, August, 1996, page 8.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Motivation and Delinquency, page 182.

“the goals or aspirations that people learn from their cultures, the norms that people employ when attempting to achieve the goals, and the institutionalized means that are available for goal achievement.”<sup>31</sup>

Real life violence seen in American society is a very short leap from the anomie theory. For example, imagine a minority teenager in an inter-city neighborhood. He has been ingrained his entire life with the American cultural values of success, accumulation of wealth and status. Yet he comes from a poor, single parent family with little support from the school system or his community. There are circumstantial roadblocks continually placed in his way of achieving the “American dream.” The alternatives appear limited to him, so he attempts to secure these cherished goals through criminal means. Not only is this not a far-fetched example, but, sadly, it actually happens hundreds of times every day in this country.

A similar correlation can be drawn between strain theory and school violence. The teenage subculture in schools has a well-divided set of social groups, or cliques, that are based upon popularity.<sup>32</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> M. Reid Counts & Gordon A. Crews: *Evolution of School Disturbance in America*, page 10. Praeger, Westport, CT, 1997. Merton's theory is considered to be one of the most well developed forms of strain theory, and the one most widely used to describe strain theory. His theory is an expansion of the work of Emile Durkheim, a well regarded sociologist from the turn of the century.

<sup>32</sup> W.S. Wooden: *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws*, page 51. Wadsworth Publishing, New York, N.Y., 1995. In Wooden's book, there are twelve groups outlined in the typical U.S. high school structure. They are: Jocks - boys who participate in sports; Cheerleaders - attractive, school spirited; Tweakies - boys who have an extremely “laid back” attitude; Trendies/Socs/Preppies - desperate to fit in and spend much time shopping; Drama Freaks - students who are completely engrossed in acting; Bandos - students who are completely engrossed in band; Smacks/Brains - students who have an extremely high GPA; Dirtbags - middle-class but considered “low-lives” by others; Sluts - girls who wear provocative clothing; Punks -



cultural values of school society place a strong emphasis on being in a popular clique. An individual who is not a part of a popular group, but desires to be popular because of the perceived importance of it, usually faces multiple barriers which generally lead to a denial of access to that group. These situations can lead that individual to depression or desperation that may result in violence to that group or the individual themselves.

Additionally, violence can be a reaction by those outside a popular clique, even if they have no interest in being part of the group. Many students who are “loners” or labeled as unpopular “may have to endure insults, name-calling, put-downs and other types of peer harassment, both mental and physical.”<sup>33</sup> In the past, this type of abuse was considered just a part of life for these students, and little was done to prevent the mistreatment by either the student or those around them. Today students experiencing this type of situation refuse to sit back and take it. Instead they treat this form of “disrespect” as a call to action, which can lead to retribution in the form of violence.

The social control theory is the final area to be discussed from the sociological perspective. The thought here is that as part of our natural makeup, all people have a tendency toward crime, but we learn restraint,

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dress in torn jeans, combat boots and mohawks; Death Rockers/Metal Heads - live and act like the music; Loners - no peer group with whom to socialize, always alone.

which halts our behaviors. We are inhibited from acting in a criminal manner because of controls placed in our lives that check our desires - - like laws, parents, school, church, etc. The theory also contends that time committed to socially acceptable activities controls our ability to become involved in crimes. Conversely, those who do not have many of these controls in their lives, or are unconcerned about society's laws because they fail to have "bonds to conventional others," are more likely to engage in criminal activities.<sup>34</sup>

Like the cultural theory, the real life connection to the control theory can also be gang involvement. Gangs are often the strongest bonds an adolescent has in his or her life, and as described above, gang activity usually has associated criminal and violent behaviors.

Another issue not yet discussed, and one that is related to control theory, is drug usage. There are a variety of reasons that an adolescent begins using drugs, but the important issue in this discussion is what happens once the drug usage starts. Individuals usually become disconnected with traditional bonds and relationships. They often lose control over their ability to decipher right from wrong, leading many times to criminal and violent behavior. The extent of connection between

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<sup>33</sup> William Roger Fatum & Jonathan C. Hoyle: *The School Counselor*, "Is it Violence? School Violence from the Student Perspective: Trends and Interventions," September 1996, page 29.

<sup>34</sup> Motivation and Delinquency, page 183-185. The "bonds to conventional others" is defined as individuals or institutions in a persons life who adhere to the traditionally acceptable code of behavior and who that person respects enough to maintain the same type of behavior out of fear or concern that those individuals or institutions may have less than positive opinions of them.

drug use and violence was crystallized in a 1997 study in the *American Journal of Public Health*. The research of more than forty five hundred high school seniors found that of those involved in some form of violent behavior, nearly 73% “had also used illicit drugs.”<sup>35</sup>

### **Biological**

Biological theories have been offered up as potential causes for violent behavior as far back as the 1870s when Italian physician Cesare Lombroso stated in his book *L’Uomo Delinquente* that some people are “born to be criminals.”<sup>36</sup> While much of this and other early biological theory work has been discredited or found to be flawed,<sup>37</sup> the belief that biology has a place in the violent tendencies of people has been and continues to be studied in the latter half of this century.

The biological perspective recently has focused on neurologic problems and potential correlations to violent behavior. Brain injuries, tumors and dysfunctions all have been addressed as having some possible connection to deviance and violence. Some studies have gone so

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<sup>35</sup> Phyllis Ellickson, Hilary Saner & Kimberly A. McGuigan: *American Journal of Public Health*, “Profiles of Violent Youth: Substance Use and Other Concurrent Problems,” June 1997, page 988.

<sup>36</sup> *The Adolescent Criminal*, page 111.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* Many of the early discredited and flawed biological studies focused on comparisons between physical characteristics and lifestyle choices of individuals with criminal activity. Some of these comparisons included size of lips, jaws, noses, necks, skull shapes, hair and eye color, weight, as well as preferences for tattoos and orgies. Other work done in the early 20th Century addressed issues of heredity and genetic theories of violence, which gave rise to characterizations of “bad apple, bad blood and the bad seed.”

far as to place an emphasis on learning disabilities and low IQ as possible contributors to at-risk personality types for violent behavior.<sup>38</sup>

Finally, biochemical research has been the latest direction in the search for a link between biology and violence. This field of study has addressed “such areas as nutritional deficiencies, hypoglycemia, allergies and environmental contaminants.”<sup>39</sup> There is also evidence that people who are violent have a biochemical abnormality that slows down their production of adrenaline.<sup>40</sup> This demand for increased stimulation to produce a more intense experience leads often to a more violent reaction. While this field is relatively virgin territory, investigators are hopeful that expanded examination in this area will shed new light on the causes of violent behavior. Despite the limited knowledge base and the sometimes disputed and controversial nature of biological theories of violence, there is optimism that future studies may provide additional answers to potential causes of violence.

### **Psychological**

Similar to the sociological and biological explanations of violent behavior, experts evaluating the psychological aspects of violence note that there is no clear model or single profile of a violent youth. However, contrary to the other two theories, the American Psychological

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<sup>38</sup> Evolution of School Disturbance in America, page 11.

<sup>39</sup> The Adolescent Criminal, page 116-117.

Association has established that “the strongest developmental predictor of a child’s involvement in violence is a history of previous violence.”<sup>41</sup> In this statement, the Association has provided those concerned with limiting youth violence with a critical starting point. If a child, even at a very young age, shows a relatively higher level of anti-social behavior than his peers do over a number of years, then they are at a higher risk of continuing this pattern into adolescence. These are the children that are going to be at greater risk for committing violent acts throughout their lives.

While a history of violence maybe the greatest single predictor of future brutality, the various types of “family breakdown” in a child’s life is a crucial causal factor for adolescent violence highlighted throughout psychology texts. Regardless of socioeconomic background, the negative aspects in a child’s family life can have a direct impact on their psyche.

Any adult who as a child lived in a house where the parents divorced can tell you of the emotional pain experienced. Studies consistently find that children that come from “broken” homes have higher rates of criminal activity than those living with both biological parents.<sup>42</sup> In a study of juveniles in correctional institutions, only “thirty

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<sup>40</sup> Patrick O’Neill, “Dangerous Minds: “What Really Goes on When Kids Kill?” *Flint Journal*, 5-31-98, page H4.

<sup>41</sup> American Psychological Association: *Violence & Youth: Psychology’s Response*, page 17. Public Interest Directorate, Washington, D.C., 1993

<sup>42</sup> Janelle Rohr, Editor: *Violence in American: Opposing Viewpoints*, Bryce J. Christensen: “Family Breakdown Promotes Teen Violence,” page 178. Greenhaven Press, Inc., San Diego, CA, 1990.

percent lived with both parents while growing up.... In contrast, over seventy percent of the nation's children were living with two parents.”<sup>43</sup>

While the number of parents in a home is a factor, the quality of the parent(s) and the household environment the child is in has a direct effect on their future potential violent nature. Physical abuse by parents has a devastating effect on a child, and will lead to a cycle of violence that will continue for life. A 1993 report by the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth stated that while “physical punishment may produce obedience in the short term, continued over time it tends to increase the probability of aggressive and violent behavior during childhood and adulthood, both inside and outside the family.”<sup>44</sup> Additionally, numerous studies have shown that those students who have experienced physical abuse at home are much more likely to be negatively aggressive at school toward both peers and teachers.<sup>45</sup>

Beyond the breakdown of the family or physical abuse, children learn violence in the home through other avenues. It could be the exposure to domestic violence that is not directed toward them, but rather at another family member, or it can be the lifestyle the family

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid, page 177. This was a 1987 Department of Justice study of juveniles in state-operated institutions.

<sup>44</sup> Violence & Youth: Psychology's Response, page 19.

<sup>45</sup> Allan M. Hoffman, editor: *Schools, Violence and Society*, Jeffrey J. Haugaard & Margaret M. Feerick: “The Influence of Child Abuse and Family Violence on Violence in the Schools”, page 82-85. Praeger, Westport, CT, 1996.

practices. Exposure to violence on television can lead to the development of a violent child. In over 3,000 studies examining television violence, virtually all of them found that children who are exposed to it “are more prone to use physical aggression than those who don’t.”<sup>46</sup>

Additionally, the availability of guns, while not necessarily contributing to the motive, does provide a method for children to kill. How many times have you picked up the paper and read that a young child has accidentally killed himself or another because a gun was available in the home? Even outside of the home, the proliferation of guns in our society and available to children is staggering. In a survey of students in Los Angeles high schools, 48.2% said it would be “easy” for them to get a gun, and 58.7% said they could purchase a gun for \$50 to \$200, with 25.1% saying that they could obtain a gun for less than \$50.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, in the 1991 Youth Gun Survey of high school students, 22% of those surveyed said they currently own a gun, and 30% said they had owned a gun at one time.<sup>48</sup>

There are also a number of psychoanalytic theories for youth violence. While even Freud addressed the issues of delinquent behavior, it was August Aichorn who refined the theory for children. He stated that children are predisposed to criminal acts because their

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<sup>46</sup> Violence in America: Opposing View Points, page 163.

<sup>47</sup> The Council of State Governments, “From Words to Weapons: The Violence Surrounding Our Schools,”

“personalities compel them to act instinctively, impulsively and for self-satisfaction without feelings of guilt.”<sup>49</sup> His theory continued to be polished, with other theorists suggesting that rather than being “compelled” to act out, that they lacked the ability to control their “primitive” childhood urges. Regardless, psychoanalytic theories are severely limited because of the inability to adequately study them.<sup>50</sup>

The final and the least significant psychological factor in the makeup of a violent youth is psychopathy. The psychopath or sociopath is “an individual who is mentally unstable, antisocial, amoral, hostile, egocentric, insensitive, callous, and fearless, with limited social ties.”<sup>51</sup> Although there can be child psychopaths or sociopaths, estimates show that less than twenty five percent of all adult criminals fall into this category, and youthful offenders “are proportionately much smaller.”<sup>52</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Despite the theories and contributing factors offered in the previous pages, the real answer to the question of “why do they kill?” is that there is no single or simple answer. The student who steps into a classroom with a shotgun and uncontrolled anger is often an amalgam. The trail that finally brought him or her to this critical point of violence is

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<sup>48</sup> Joseph F. Sheley & James D. Wright: *In the Line of Fire*, page 42. Aldine De Gruyter, Hawthorne, N.Y., 1995.

<sup>49</sup> *The Adolescent Criminal*, page 118.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, page 120.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, page 121.



often diverse and tragic. The child has faced things that can be difficult for an emotionally well adjusted adult to handle, let alone an adolescent with the limited life experiences and pressures that they are ill equipped to face.

In my mind, the parents behind the child are the one factor found in this chapter that is the true turning point in whether a child leads a violent life. If a parent can limit their child's exposure to violence and provide a positive support environment, then the chances he or she will commit some terrible act have been greatly diminished. It sounds almost too easy. Unfortunately, many parents of both victims and perpetrators find out daily that it is not that simple.

### **Chapter Three: “I’m So Scared”<sup>53</sup>**

#### **Stories of Teenage Killers**

In a perfect world all schools would be free from every form of violence, but America is definitely far from perfect. The two previous chapters have dispelled the myths of this country’s violent history and clarified the numerous causes of violence in American society. This history and these causes have naturally transcended the culture as a whole and filtered into the schools. Sadly, it seems that there is an acceptance of some form of violence in our schools simply because of the sheer magnitude of it. Teachers, administrators and parents continue to address concerns through discipline, but the scuffles, skirmishes and occasional punches and kicks have been lost to bigger worries. While parents may still be slightly alarmed by the bloody nose their child suffered on the playground during recess, the real fear is that their child may never come home from school.

With the diminished concern over the little battles and a new extreme anxiety over the life threatening war zone that is growing in our schools, parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, researchers,

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<sup>53</sup> This is a quote from T.J. Solomon the fifteen-year-old student at Heritage High School in Conyers, Georgia who was responsible for the school shooting there on May 20, 1999. Fortunately no one was killed in this attack, but he wounded six fellow students. In a dazed and confused state, he stated immediately after his capture that “I’m so scared.” Regardless of their outward appearance before and during their shooting spree, many of these teenage school shooters are scared, confused and unsure why they are truly moved to kill.

government officials, the media - and everyone else who has an opinion on the subject - have been scratching their heads, pontificating about the decline of the current generation of young people and pointing fingers at each other, almost on the verge of burning the generation culprits in effigy. The hysteria has grown exponentially during a three-year period of school shootings that started on February 2, 1996 in Moses Lake, Washington, and continues to reverberate following the crescendo in Littleton, Colorado on April 20, 1999. While blood continues to spill at the hands of juvenile killers, the eleven incidents that occurred during those three years have left twenty-nine students and four teachers dead, and another seventy-six wounded.<sup>54</sup>

This chapter will examine several of these incidents, providing a background into the killers' lives, recounting what actually happened in each of the incidents, and offering potential explanations for what may have caused these particular students to kill. While all eleven cases mentioned above provide important commentary on the nature of school violence in our society, the five discussed here were selected for the impact they have had on American culture. Of the eleven, these five have been the most strongly scrutinized by the media, political leaders, and society as a whole. These five are also the most deadly and provide the graphic testimony to the potential devastation of school violence.

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<sup>54</sup> <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/schoolviolence1.html>

Because these incidents are relatively recent, much of the information in this chapter relies on reports in the popular press.

**Pearl, Mississippi - 8:10 a.m., October 1, 1997**

Despite the fact that in February of the previous school year Barry Loukaitis, age fourteen, killed a teacher and two students, and wounded another in Washington State, most people working in education never expected the 1997-98 school year to be a watershed for school violence in America. Loukaitis was depressed, suffered from an inferiority complex, his suicidal mother was about to divorce his father, and he was being mercilessly teased at school by a “jock” who ended up being one of his victims. So, in light of these contributing factors, many were not expecting a repeat the following fall, and definitely not the massacre that occurred throughout the year. For some, the 1997-98 school year was a reality check, for everyone else it was a turning point in public perception. It was a deadly change in our views of school violence.

Like Loukaitis, and many teenagers in our society today, Luke Woodham had a variety of problems. His father abandoned his family when he was eleven. From a psychological prospective, he was hypersensitive to insult and had erratic coping skills. He had recently broken up with a girlfriend, which had “devastated” him. He even stated that “no one ever truly loved me.” Woodham’s actions and mental

capacity were much more frightening than these typical adolescent difficulties.

Luke was considered to have a lack of empathy for anyone or anything. In his personal journal entry of April 14, 1997, he graphically described how he made his “first kill.” The victim was his own dog, and the journal provided the gut wrenching scene in detail as he beat the dog with a club, wrapped it in a bag, and set it on fire. His final statement in the journal about what occurred was simply that “it was true beauty.”<sup>55</sup>

Woodham had also gotten involved with a Satanic Cult known as the Kroth. It was previously called the Fourth Reich, which placed Hitler as one of its heroes. According to Woodham, the leader of this cult, Grant Boyette, had almost complete control over his life. Woodham would give him money from his job at a pizza place, and he was encouraged to read the writings of Adolf Hitler and Fredrich Nietzsche and incorporate them into his life. Boyette would make him do “different things” by controlling him with demons and together they would begin to plot their revenge on those in school who had made their lives miserable.

On the evening of Sunday, September 28, 1997, Luke invited several of the “group” to his house. During their time together, he pulled one of his friends to the side, Lucas Thompson, and described his plans to kill his mother, take her car to school and then kill his ex-girlfriend

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.courier-journal.com/cjextra/schoolshoot/SCHglimpsesof wallen.html>

and others he did not like. That same evening, he talked with Grant Boyette several times. It is assumed that these conversations were part of the planning process to carry out what Luke had already described.

Three days later, on October 1, 1997, Woodham woke early and got a butcher knife from the kitchen. In the hallway he ran into his mother and stabbed her to death. After he cleaned up the blood, he showered, talked with Lucas and Boyette again and grabbed his brother's hunting rifle. He then took his mother's car with the loaded rifle in the trunk. At school, he walked through the parking lot, not attempting to conceal his weapon. He then headed straight for his ex-girlfriend, Christina Menefee, and her friend Lydia Dew, and shot them both at point-blank range. He continued to shoot, reloaded the rifle, and began shooting again. When he finally stopped, seven more students were wounded.

While Luke Woodham is a clear perpetrator in this crime, investigators have found that he was in some ways also a victim. Despite his inherent cruelty, his behaviors were strongly influenced by the satanic cult he ran to in loneliness, and its leader, Grant Boyette. Boyette, who was charged with conspiracy to commit murder in the case, was known to the cult members as "father." In addition to encouraging Luke to kill his ex-girlfriend, he had also tried to get another cult member to poison his father.<sup>56</sup> His power over Woodham was strong.

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<sup>56</sup> <http://www.rickcross.com/reference/kroth2.html>

The mix of Boyette's influence and Luke's deeply routed anger and hatred led to the first of several horrific school shootings. Woodham is currently serving life in prison for his crimes, and Boyette is still awaiting trial.<sup>57</sup>

**Paducah, Kentucky, - 7:30 a.m., December 1, 1997**

In contrast to Luke Woodham, Michael Carneal had a history that would never have provided even the closest observer with a suspicion that he could, or would, kill. He was a recently confirmed Christian, adept in the use of a computer and a saxophone player in the band. He was not associated with a criminal background, did not take drugs, and was not involved in a cult. His father was a leader in their church, his sister the school's valedictorian. He even spent the night before his shooting spree completing his homework in his room, even though he knew he would never have the opportunity to turn it in. In fact, the only trouble Carneal ever got into in school was an incident of picking paint off the wall, and accessing the Playboy web site from a library computer.

However, the trouble for Michael Carneal grew on the first day following the Thanksgiving holiday in 1997. Until that morning, Carneal had never fired a gun in his life. The night before he had broken into his neighbor's garage and taken two shotguns, two rifles and a .22 caliber pistol. The next day he brought them to school. It was a Monday like

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<sup>57</sup> Much of the information for this section was derived from a compilation of many newspaper and internet sources. Because the facts were common knowledge because of the extensive publicity in this case,

any other. An informal prayer group of thirty-five students met in the hall before classes began, and one of the members of the group was Carneal's older sister. Just as the group finished, Carneal placed earplugs in his ears, pulled out the .22, and started firing into the group.

Ben Strong, a senior in the prayer group, who was casually warned by Carneal the week before that there would be "trouble" on Monday, did not run when the shooting started. Instead, he continually yelled at Carneal to stop shooting and drop the gun. When Carneal finally paused, Strong ran at him, pushing him against the wall. One of the earplugs slipped from Carneal's ear, and the gun fell to the floor. He looked directly into Strong's eyes and pleaded with him to "kill me, please. I can't believe I just did that." What Michael Carneal did was kill three of his classmates and wound five others.

The question of "why" was asked like it always is following a shooting like this one. Unlike many of these incidents, the "why" was much more difficult to determine. During the investigation, two "typical" teenage issues arose in that could have accounted for Carneal's actions. First, one of his victims, Nicole Hadley, was someone in whom he had a romantic interest, but who had no interest in him. Second, an unofficial school newsletter written and distributed by students stated - incorrectly - that he was gay.

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specific sources were only cited when information was not found in more than one location.



Yet these two somewhat minor offenses against a fourteen-year-old in most cases would hardly be enough to warrant bringing five guns and almost 1,000 rounds of ammunition to school. For Carneal, a loner with possible serious mental problems, little has been found beyond that to account for his actions. He eventually pled guilty, but mentally ill, to three counts of murder, five counts of attempted murder, and one count of burglary, and he was sentenced to life in prison with the opportunity for parole in twenty-five years. He will serve the first part of the sentence in a juvenile prison and then be moved to an adult prison when he is eighteen.

**Jonesboro, Arkansas - 12:35 p.m., March 24, 1998**

While Michael Carneal's transformation in demeanor from an innocent, ineffectual child to a gun-toting killer shocked the nation, the astonishing aspects of the next school shooting were that there were two killers instead of one, and that they were much younger. Until Mitchell Johnson, age thirteen, and Andrew Golden, age eleven, opened fire on the Westside Middle School grounds, the previous school shootings had been committed by high school students at high schools.

As the story unfolded, it was becoming clear that singularly these children probably would not have been killers, and "together they formed

a combustible duo.”<sup>58</sup> Johnson, a husky boy, often intimidated other students with his size. He was also a singer in the church choir who always responded to adults by saying “yes sir” or “no ma’am.” Golden was a “frontiersboy” who spent much of his life around guns and in the outdoors. Although he loved to play the trumpet in the school band, he was also always eager to dash off to the backyard shooting range. He received his first shotgun from “Santa” at the tender age of six, and guns were in his house and his grandparents’ home. The latter is where he and Johnson secured their stock of weapons for the assault on Westside Middle School.

On March 24, 1998, Mitchell Johnson (Mitch) and Andrew Golden (Drew) intentionally missed their school bus and took Mitch’s stepfather’s van. The van was filled with survival gear, as if they were preparing to live in the wilderness for some extended period of time. They attempted to steal some weapons from Drew’s house, but the locked steel cabinet containing his father’s guns proved to be too difficult. Eventually giving up, they went to Drew’s grandfather’s house and took ten guns and a large amount of ammunition. They then drove to a secluded, wooded area about 100 yards from their school and prepared for the assault. Drew ran into the building, pulled a fire alarm and then hustled back to his position in the woods with Mitch. As the students streamed out of

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<sup>58</sup> Blank, Jonah, Vest, Jason, and Parker, Suzie. “The Children of Jonesboro.” *U.S. News & World Report*.

the building - as they are supposed to in the event of a fire - the two boys began firing their weapons.

They fired twenty-two shots in approximately four minutes and then took off back to the van. In the schoolyard, four young girls and a teacher were dead and ten others were wounded. Police were able to capture the boys with little difficulty within fifteen minutes of the shooting because a group of construction workers saw smoke from the field.

As people around the country wondered how two “babies” could do such a terrible thing, information began to mount about the lives they had led and the factors that may have precipitated their actions. Both had a history of rough behavior. Mitch’s imposing size and manner placed him in the category of a “bully” in school, and he often acted like a gangster telling kids at school that he “had a lot of killing to do.”<sup>59</sup> Drew, a smaller more unassuming boy, never had the physical presence of a bully, but definitely had the demeanor. At the age of five he was making obscene gestures to the neighbors and torturing cats in the neighborhood - eventually killing one of them with a pellet gun. He was also punished by the school in the first grade for shooting a mix of sand

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April 6, 1998

<sup>59</sup> Blank, Jonah, Vest, Jason, and Parker, Suzie. “The Children of Jonesboro.” *U.S. News & World Report*. April 6, 1998, page 16

and gravel from a popgun into the face of a classmate. Trouble seemed to be a part of his life.

While Drew was the provider of the guns, Mitch was the motivation behind the action. The match that lit the fuse for Mitch was fairly typical for these types of atypical shootings. Although only thirteen, he was angry over the rebuff of a young girl. Yet the conditions in his life that led to the ultimate action were varied and many. His father was not abusive, but he did have a temper that appeared to frighten Mitch. His parents eventually divorced, and he moved away with his mother. He had an older stepsister who was “disturbed.” She suffered from depression and was suicidal. Mitch also witnessed some of her actions, and she would often take her troubles out on him.

Of all of the difficulties in Mitch’s life, though, the biggest was one that did not get uncovered for many years after it occurred. During a summer visit with his father in 1997, Mitch was accused of fondling a toddler. His father was gravely concerned about the incident and wanted to get his son some help. So he contacted the police, and Mitch was charged in juvenile court. As this issue was being discussed following the shooting, Mitch told his lawyer that he himself had been sexually abused. As more information was revealed it became clear that an older boy in a park had anally sodomized Mitch many years before. It was an

incident that confused and frightened him so much that he believed things could not get any worse if he shot up his school with a gun.

At a final hearing, Mitch and Drew were both sentenced to be confined to a juvenile facility until they are either eighteen or twenty-one. Drew appeared reserved and unrepentant, while Mitch, on the other hand was visibly distraught about what he had done. He told the court that he never really expected to hurt anyone, and that his actions were only intended to scare his fellow students. Regardless of the motivations, the resulting misdeeds placed a whole new perspective on what a child had the potential to do.

### **Springfield, Oregon - 8:00 a.m., May 21, 1998**

Less than two months after the Jonesboro, Arkansas shooting, fifteen-year-old Kip Kinkel unleashed his youthful wrath on the students of Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon. Like the previous four shooters, Kinkel faced a variety of problems in his life. He had few friends, had an older, intelligent and popular sister, and struggled in school. He was also a hyperactive child who was placed on Ritalin when he was twelve. When he was diagnosed with severe depression, he started taking Prozac.

The profile of Kinkel is more frighteningly filled with other obsessions that went beyond the typical adolescent difficulties. He held a fascination with guns and explosives. He begged his father for guns so

frequently that the elder Kinkel was afraid that if he was not actively involved in the procurement of a gun and the supervision of the use of the weapon that his son “was going to get a gun one way or another.”<sup>60</sup> Kip had also downloaded recipes from the internet on how to make bombs, and police found twenty such devices hidden throughout his home following the shootings. One of the bombs had a timer and was built like a fire extinguisher. According to Lane County Sheriff Jan Clements, it was “large enough to cause collateral damage to the neighborhood.”<sup>61</sup> Kip also believed he heard voices talking to him, telling him to kill. He had a history of torturing animals, and he had just quit going to anger management classes that his father insisted he attend.

The ordeal in Springfield began with a huge warning sign from Kinkel that, if handled differently, might have changed everything. On May 20, 1998, Kip brought a loaded .32-caliber pistol to school, which was later found in his locker. The severity of the incident resulted in a mandatory suspension from school, and the local police arrested him. He was ultimately released into his father’s custody. Once at home, Kip and his father apparently argued over the elder Kinkel’s desire to send him to a National Guard program for problem teens. It is assumed that he killed his father during the argument, and then waited for his mother to come home, at which time he killed her as well. Kip then spent the

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<sup>60</sup> Cloud, John. “Of Arms and the Boy.” *Time*. July 6, 1998, page 59

entire night at home with the decomposing bodies of his parents, waiting for his opportunity to return to the school the next day.

At approximately 8:00 a.m. the next morning, Kip pulled into the school parking lot with his now deceased parents' car. With a rifle under a trenchcoat, he walked into the school cafeteria just before the first bell was to ring. He had fifty rounds of ammunition in the rifle, and before other students tackled him - including one who was seriously wounded with a gun shot blast to the chest - Kinkel had discharged all fifty rounds. The confusion and panic was only slightly overwhelmed by the carnage. Of the three to four hundred students in the cafeteria, two were dead and twenty others were wounded. Once he was taken down, he struggled to grab one of the two pistols he was carrying in his waistband. When he was relieved of those, he begged the five boys holding him down to "just shoot me, shoot me now."<sup>62</sup>

However, Kinkel's rage did not end there. Once in police custody, he was placed in an interrogation room where he was being interviewed. The detective conducting the interview left the room for a few minutes. While he was gone, Kip was able to get his hands, which were behind him, to the front and he removed the knife he had tucked to his leg. When the detective returned he barely missed stabbing the officer, who then subdued Kinkel with pepper spray. After searching him for

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<sup>61</sup> Sullivan, Randall. "A Boy's Life." *Rolling Stone*. October 1, 1998, page 48

additional weapons, the police placed him in a confinement area where he went into a rage throwing himself repeatedly against the door.

As the days, weeks, and months passed following the shooting, more information was discovered about Kip Kinkel and the potential motivations behind his actions. The timing of his actions had a good deal to do with his expulsion from school on gun charges. He was convinced that he had no choice but to kill his parents because of the embarrassment he had caused them by being expelled. Yet this incident was just the trigger. Beyond the timing, he was a teenager who was simply angry at the world. In reviewing his journal it was found that he was suicidal over the pressures placed upon him by his parents and because he had been spurned by a girl at school. He stated that he thought about killing people all the time, and he said “that is how I will repay all of you (expletive) for all you put me through.”<sup>63</sup> In short, he was filled with rage and had now idea how to handle it or to change it.

Despite the efforts of Kinkel’s attorneys to convince the courts that he was mentally ill at the time of the shootings, Kip eventually pled guilty to four counts of murder and twenty-six counts of attempted murder. He was sentenced to 112 years in prison in November 1999, and, because he is not entitled to parole for the charges, he will spend the rest of his life in prison.

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<sup>62</sup> Sullivan, Randall. “A Boy’s Life.” *Rolling Stone*. October 1, 1998



**Littleton, Colorado - 11:25 a.m., April 20, 1999**

The previous four events discussed all occurred in the 1997-98 school year, and, by June, the nation was grateful that school was out for the summer. However, the kids would not be away from school forever, and eventually they would return and the apprehension and fear would return. The 1998-99 year started off well. No major incidents were streaked across the headlines, and by spring the teachers, parents, and the rest of the country felt relief and were almost ready to chalk up the previous year as an aberration. What they did not know was the worst was yet to come, and what would happen had been in the planning for a long time.

In fact, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had an elaborate plan to kill hundreds of people, and they had been working on it for most of the school year. April 20, 1999 was the day that they were to carry it out. It was to start with three sets of bombs: one placed several miles away from the school to go off first as a distraction; the next set would explode in the cafeteria and flush out students where the pair would shoot them down; the final set would be in their car and go off when the police and other emergency workers arrived. When the bombs did not go off as planned, Harris and Klebold haphazardly decided to simply rush the school with guns blazing.

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<sup>63</sup> "Teen Gunman's Journal Reflects Suicidal, Homicidal Thoughts." *Flint Journal*. November 3, 1999.

They first killed two students in the parking lot before entering the building. Once inside, they headed directly for the cafeteria where they threw pipe bombs and fired their weapons into the crowd. As students and teachers took cover, the pair then exited the cafeteria, encountered the school security guard, with whom they had a shoot out, and then headed for the second floor. There they shot a teacher and entered the library. Once in the library they demanded that all “jocks” stand up. After they had killed ten students in the library, they then turned their weapons on themselves. They had not killed the hundreds that they had hoped for, but in just forty-six minutes they managed to cause the worst attack on a school by students in the nation’s history, leaving a total of fifteen people dead (including Harris and Klebold) and another twenty-three wounded.<sup>64</sup>

Like many of these incidents, there were warning signs that were missed. Harris had a website that announced his anger and intentions to kill others. One of those specifically mentioned as a target contacted the police, who investigated but took no action. Harris, along with

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<sup>64</sup> It is impossible in this type of document to fully outline the events that occurred in those forty-six minutes. There were many efforts of individuals inside and outside the school to protect and save lives in a situation that was incredibly confusing and dangerous. There have been several articles written that provide much more detail about this incident, but the most comprehensive document would be an article by *Time*. Gibbs, Nancy and Roche, Timothy. “The Columbine Tapes.” *Time*. December 20, 1999. Additionally, the *Time* article (along with others written about the incident) provides more background on what may have caused the two teenagers to strike out the way they did. In reviewing the material for this section of this chapter, it was clear to me that this particular incident (which is still being reviewed and investigated by authorities) could be an entire thesis or book on its own. However, it was important to provide some information on what occurred in Littleton, Colorado, even if it lacks the depth necessary to fully understand what occurred there.

Klebold, had also been arrested previously for breaking into a van, but the police never connected the two investigations. Harris also had weapons in his home that could have very well been noticed by his parents, but they failed to tell the difference between a BB gun and a real rifle. Additionally, Harris' father answered the phone one day and was told "your clips are in," referring to ammunition that Harris had ordered. His father simply thought it was a wrong number.

Once the warning signs were missed and the rampage was completed, the questioning of "why" began. Unlike the previous shootings, why these young killers did what they did could not be answered by those responsible - they were gone. Yet we probably have more information about their motivations than any of the others because of the videotapes they prepared in anticipation of their deaths. In December 1999, *Time* did a story on the five videotapes made by the killers that the staff at the magazine was able to view. In them, Harris and Klebold graphically depict their plans for destroying those they hate and provide insight into the questions of "why."

Although they were angry and filled with rage, probably their most disturbing motivations center around their desire to be respected and to gain celebrity status. Throughout the tapes they talked of how movies would be made about what they did, whether Steven Spielberg or Quentin Tarantino would direct these movies, and how they would be

respected through the revenge they took. They also talked about how they desired to haunt their victims as nightmares and flashbacks, and how they felt bad that this would also haunt their parents. Yet probably the most disturbing statement made was that they believed that “we’re going to kick-start a revolution . . . a revolution of the dispossessed.”<sup>65</sup>

In a way, that is what they have done. Following their attack, copycat incidents flooded the country, shutting down schools. It appeared that a rebellion in the schools was taking place. The Columbine massacre provided others who were oppressed to be conquering heroes for a day. While thankfully nothing has occurred since then on the same scale as the Harris and Klebold revolt, the real revolution has been in the minds of this country’s teachers, parents, administrators, and politicians. All have been placed in a state of constant anxiety that something similar, or worse, may occur, and, in turn, a hypersensitivity to the actions of our children is occurring. When a child is suspended from school for a gun charge because he imitated Elmer Fudd, then we as a society have let the Columbine killers’ revolution succeed.<sup>66</sup> The real lesson to be learned from this incident is not overreaction, but sensible observation.

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<sup>65</sup> Gibbs, Nancy and Roche, Timothy. “The Columbine Tapes.” *Time*. December 20, 1999, page 42.

<sup>66</sup> Abercrombie, Shena. “Boy Mimics Elmer Fudd, Punished on Gun Charge.” *Flint Journal*. May 8, 1999, page A1. An eleven-year-old boy was removed from school for one day when he was caught imitating Elmer Fudd and he said that he had a gun and was hunting “wabbits.” This was the same thing the cartoon character does. The actions were taken by school administrators who were panicky after a week of school bomb threats less than a month after the Columbine incident.

## **Conclusion**

There are a number of common linkages between these five cases, which unfortunately are also common circumstances in the lives of many, if not most teenagers in our society. First, all of them suffered from a term that would be most appropriately called “angst.” They generally felt marginalized by parents, friends, teachers or others in their lives. They had difficulty coping with their feelings of anger towards these people and felt that they must take action, which in these cases were through the violent act of shooting people. The second important commonality is the access to guns. All of the shooters had some familiarity with guns. If they did not actually have the weapons they used in their killing, they knew how to easily get access to them. Third, they had a history of violence or some other warning signals that pointed to a potential for violence. These warning signals may have been something very minor like withdrawing from family or friends, to the more serious signs of abusing animals or bringing a weapon to school. Finally, the killers often had support systems that were weak or unstable. They lacked friends, their relationships with their parents were poor and they were usually classified as “bullies” or “loners.” In essence, they were on the fringe with no one available to pull them back to reality.

There is also a vagueness that remains. Even though judges, lawyers, psychologists and others evaluated the various motivations of these young killers, there is still a blank feeling that exists inside those observing these cases, like a piece of the puzzle is missing in the story. In all of these cases at one point or another the youthful mass-murderers seemed confused about their true motivations. They would actually say, "I don't know why I did it." They would appear confused or beg to be killed by their captors. They appeared lost. These perceptions may only be our internal reactions to the incomprehensible actions of children. Yet the confusion expressed by these youth killers only seems to add to our confusion over how these things could happen at all.

## **Chapter Four: The Politics of School Violence**

The United States is a nation of laws and government. When its citizens are suffering or in crisis, they would like to turn to their government in hopes of finding a listening ear, a sympathetic heart, and a group of dedicated servants whose one goal is to ease the pain of the country and make changes to correct the ills of society. Yet, often the grieving citizenry does not find what it is looking for, but rather is confronted with a politically divided behemoth whose multiple parts are most interested in capitalizing on the nation's suffering. The rush of politicians to address a crisis is more a knee-jerk reaction to their own personal desires to feather their own nests with public appearances and profound conciliatory speeches designed to score political points in hopes of continuing their political careers.

While this is a somewhat cynical view of government's response to explosive domestic crises, the continually ineffective and rhetorical retorts by politicians is disheartening for many. The reality is that when a high profile issue is before government, the leadership in government turns to their political instincts, and this is inevitably disconcerting to the citizens they represent. The feeling of frustration about the inability of government to impact crisis issues in our country is compounded

exponentially when it comes to issues involving education, and particularly school violence.

Part of the problem of government's failure to effectively address educational issues is based in the historical disconnect that exists in our society between these two entities. The division between government and education originates from colonial times. Even today, many in this country would agree that little has changed from the early American's two-fold definition of public schooling: "that students were taught as a group rather than individually and that the effort was an investment for public benefit."<sup>67</sup>

The first law mandating that schools be established was the "Old Delauder Satan" law of 1647, which required all towns in the colonies to have schools and teachers.<sup>68</sup> While the law stated this, the creation and administration of schools was never actually done by the government. In reality, these first schools were operated by community leaders through a community tax.<sup>69</sup> This tax represented the initial connection between government providing funding for schools, while still being separate from their operation.

As the colonies grew into a nation, the funding connection between government and the schools grew stronger. During the national period

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<sup>67</sup> Counts, M. Reid and Crews, Gordon A. Evolution of School Disturbance in America. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997, pg. 26

<sup>68</sup> *ibid*, pg. 27



(1780-1830), “efforts of parents, churches, voluntary associations and entrepreneurs” produced public funding of privately controlled schools.<sup>70</sup> These private schools primarily benefited those in the upper classes. In an effort to educate more than just the rich, some money was also given by the government to voluntary associations that would establish “charity schools.” These schools were responsible for educating the poor and would ultimately become “the urban public school system.”<sup>71</sup> However, there was a great disparity in the level of funding education between the “private” and “charity” schools, which is similar to what we see in the American school system today.

By the mid-1800s a “common school” was created to offer common teaching curricula.<sup>72</sup> This evolution in the field of education allowed the various schools funded through taxes (the government) to be unified under one educational agenda. Despite the creation of this “common school,” there was still a great deal of inequity in the funding of these schools, and little operational connection between schools and government.

As schools grew through the 1800s and 1900s, the government continued to have little involvement in the education of its youth. When there were interventions by government into the teaching of its citizens it

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<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 41

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*

was usually in the form of propaganda or was designed to “shape” its citizens in its own image. The school system was used early in this nation’s history to promote the appropriate political and social ideals of the government. In the 1950s and 1960s the government encouraged curricula changes to address other societal concerns through driver’s education, home economics, health education, and mandatory attendance to reduce juvenile delinquency.<sup>73</sup> The cold war with the Soviet Union also placed an increasing emphasis on educating the youth of the nation in an effort to be more productive and increase our national defenses. In 1958, the United States Congress passed the National Defense Education Act of 1958. This law’s primary purpose was to increase our national security through the education of our young people.<sup>74</sup> Again, these interjections by the government served primarily the government’s own purposes.

Fighting nearly two hundred years of disconnection between education and the government, a change at the federal level in the mid-1960s signaled a desire to have more substantive involvement in the education of American young people. By passing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA), Congress established “educational opportunity and quality as a federal responsibility.” This

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid, pg. 52

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, pg. 80

<sup>74</sup> Ibid, pg. 80-81

change in national policy opened the floodgates on interventions by the government in the education of those under the age of eighteen. In fact, in the early 1990s alone more than a dozen issues were addressed through federal policies or legislation that impacted the education of children.<sup>75</sup>

While the divide between government and schools has gotten smaller in the last thirty years, the government's historical separation from education has left policy makers at a disadvantage to address critical problems that arise within the schools. This factor has placed the debate over how to address school violence prevention within the schools primarily in the hands of school boards, administrators, teachers and parents (see Chapter Five). Meanwhile local, state and national governments continue to stumble and bumble their way through a few glamorous causes of school violence that are societal in nature. In the process of addressing school violence they fail to focus on many of the causes of violence and fall desperately short of success in dealing with the ones they do attempt to legislate.

### **Gun Control**

Despite all the potential for positively impacting school violence through governmental avenues, the issue most discussed from a government perspective has been gun control. It is true that additional

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<sup>75</sup> A list of the specific policies and laws on a federal level are outlined on pages 82-83 of Crews and Count.

limitations on a child's ability to gain access to guns would always have benefit, but there are numerous causal factors to violence in general that could make a much larger difference in the incidence of violence (see discussion in Chapter Two). Yet, despite that fact, government officials continually fixate on gun control.

To gain a better understanding of the wasted effort in gun control, it is important to understand the history of the debate. Whenever the latest shooting in the United States sets off another protracted discussion on gun control, both sides usually begin from a constitutional prospective. Those opposed to increased gun control have always argued that their rationale against more restrictions lies within the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. Those in favor of gun control will concede that there is a right to own guns, but that it is a limited right only for specific purposes and that government should be able to limit that right within certain boundaries. Just as a refresher, the amendment actually states that "a well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."<sup>76</sup> Like much of the constitution, this amendment provides both sides of the gun control issue room for arguing that they have the high ground and that the founding fathers were on their side of the debate.

The first major ruling in the gun control debate did not come recently. In 1876 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled for the first time in this nation's history that the Second Amendment is only significant when connected to the government, not to private groups or individuals.<sup>77</sup> This was a significant ruling because it provided those in favor of limiting the right of United States citizens to have guns the Second Amendment and a Supreme Court ruling from which to build. However, little practical change occurred in gun legislation until nearly sixty years later.

In 1911 the state of New York did pass the first law requiring all persons who owned and carried a concealed weapon to have a license. The Sullivan Law, as it was known, was a reaction to the increasing violence on the streets of New York City and was motivated primarily by the criminal activities of members of organized crime syndicates.<sup>78</sup> Despite the passage of this single law affecting one state, the real debate over gun control did not begin to take place for two more decades.

It was in the 1930s when the first real national debate over gun ownership took place. The gun control advocates landed the first blows in the fight, when two major pieces of federal weapons legislation were passed in this decade. The 1934 National Firearms Act was the first

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<sup>76</sup> United States Constitution, 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment. The writer secured the amendment through a search on the internet and the website <http://www.mv.com/users/sos/Constitution.html>

<sup>77</sup> Utter, Glenn H. The Encyclopedia of Gun Control and Gun Rights. Phoenix, AZ: The Oryx Press, 2000, pg. 356.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

comprehensive gun control law in this country. With its passage, new restrictions were put into place that limited the sale of over the counter weapons. It required that all machine guns, automatic weapons, sawed-off shotguns and other similar items had to be registered. That law was followed up four years later by the 1938 Federal Firearms Act. It not only added additional regulations on the manufacturing and sale of firearms, but also established the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as the licensing and regulatory agency of guns for the federal government.<sup>79</sup>

For the next thirty years, there was a lull in the debate. The country's focus on military conflicts abroad and a relatively peaceful home front accounted for much of this quiet period. By the 1960s however, unrest at home led to increased controversy over the need for additional changes to gun control laws. With the assassinations of several prominent national figures, including President John F. Kennedy, and the increasing violent protests against the Vietnam War, gun control became a principal issue among government leaders. On the heels of these concerns in the U.S., a societal and political climate existed that limited the ability of gun rights supporters to be effective in making their case against additional gun control. This cultural climate allowed for the passage of the 1968 Gun Control Act. This major piece of federal legislation tightened the process for the licensing of firearms and placed

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<sup>79</sup> Utter, Glenn H. The Encyclopedia of Gun Control and Gun Rights. Phoenix, AZ: The Oryx Press,

limits on who could purchase these weapons. The law placed restrictions on the ability of criminals, the insane, and drug addicts from purchasing guns.<sup>80</sup>

While local, state and national governments continued to pass gun control legislation in hopes of curbing gun violence, the effectiveness of these laws was often suspect. The laws were on the books, but they needed to be enforced in every corner of the legal process. Sadly though, when the enforcers were doing their job, the courts were being too lenient, and vice versa. To combat this governmental ineffectiveness, political leaders would fall back into their usual pattern of simply passing more similarly ineffective laws in hopes of correcting the problem.

The 1980s brought a brief change of prospect on gun violence. The gun rights advocates were able to finally make their case during this period based upon how poorly executed the existing, extensive gun control legislation had been over the years. A new philosophy emerged that included a move toward increased gun owners' rights while at the same time increased enforcement of penalties on illegal gun ownership and usage. In 1986, President Ronald Reagan signed the Firearms Owners Protection Act. This law placed numerous limits on much of the

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2000, pg. 357

<sup>80</sup> Ibid

Gun Control Act of 1968, and restored many previously removed rights to gun owners.<sup>81</sup>

While this was disheartening to gun control supporters, it was relatively short-lived. As little changed in the 1980s and early 1990s in the public perception of the level of gun violence in American society, and as fear grew due to well publicized violent incidents, the pendulum of support was pushed back in the direction of increased gun control. This fear, along with a political leadership change in the White House, brought back additional gun control measures.

In 1994, President William Clinton signed into law two highly controversial pieces of gun control legislation. The 1994 Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act required that there be a five day waiting period on all handguns purchased in the country while a background check was conducted. Gun control advocates argued that this law would deter those who should not have access to guns from attempting to purchase them and would keep guns out of the hands of criminals. On the other side, gun rights advocates complained that it was an additional step to prevent law abiding citizens from purchasing guns and would be nothing more

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. An interesting example of the often-ridiculous nature of the gun control debate was seen in 1981 and 1982. In an attempt to further the efforts of gun control advocates, the town of Morton Grove, Illinois passed a local ordinance in 1981 that prohibited the possession of all firearms unless they were in such a condition that they would not fire (i.e. souvenir war pieces). The gun lobby sued the town claiming it was an unconstitutional law. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Morton Grove and the law remained. Not wanting to be out done, the gun lobby was able to get Kennesaw, Georgia to pass their own law in 1982 that REQUIRED all residents to keep firearms in their homes. Using the recently ruled-upon case in the court involving Morton Grove, the law was upheld.



than an inconvenience for criminals, who would ultimately secure handguns despite the new law.

The two sides of the gun control debate continued to offer similar arguments throughout the latter half of the 1990s as a majority of the members of Congress and the White House continued to proclaim that additional legislation would eventually be the answer to reducing gun violence in this country. In an attempt to prove themselves correct, the Assault Weapons Ban Act was passed into law shortly after the Brady Bill was approved. This latest attempt to reduce gun violence placed restrictions on the sale of nineteen different assault weapons.

However, toward the end of the 1990s it was becoming apparent that gun violence was not decreasing as a result of these two pieces of legislation. In 1998, there was an attempt by the U.S. government to strengthen the Brady Bill with the institution of the National Instant Check System. This system allowed gun dealers to actually check a computer system that determined instantaneously if a handgun purchaser was disqualified from owning a gun.<sup>82</sup>

As Alexis de Tocqueville said, there is “scarcely any political question in the United States which is not resolved, sooner or later, into a judicial question.”<sup>83</sup> This, too, has happened recently with the gun

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<sup>82</sup> Utter, pg. 358

<sup>83</sup> Bybee, Rodger W. And Gee, E. Gordon. Violence, Values, and Justice in the Schools. Boston, Mass: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1982., pg. 7

control debate. Beyond the continual review and occasional overturning of some federal gun law by the U.S. Supreme Court, gun control advocates have turned to the courts to increase the pressure on the National Rifle Association and other pro-gun forces. Taking a lesson from the anti-tobacco activists, thirty cities and a handful of counties and states around the country have joined together in filing lawsuits against gun manufactures in an effort to recoup some of the costs they have incurred from gun violence. While these activities are relatively recent, the federal government saw this as a potential avenue for their involvement. In a skewed way it made sense, if legislation and enforcement was not working on the issue of gun violence then maybe the government could be effective through the judicial process. The influence of the federal government's involvement actually did motivated gun manufacturer Smith & Wesson to agree on March 17, 2000 to add trigger locks to their weapons and to begin development of a "smart gun" that is designed to work only with the actual owner of the gun. In exchange for this concession, the governments involved in the lawsuit agreed to drop their litigation against Smith & Wesson.<sup>84</sup> However, this too has stirred many to argue about whether this will actually make a significant difference in reducing gun violence.

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<sup>84</sup> [http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20000327/bs/guns\\_browning\\_1.html](http://dailynews.yahoo.com/h/nm/20000327/bs/guns_browning_1.html)

As has been discussed so far in this chapter, the United States has been ineffective in addressing gun violence through legislation and enforcement since concerns about the issue were first raised. When compared with other countries, the track record is even worse. In 1996, a man entered a nursery school in Dunblane, England and killed sixteen children and a teacher. In response to this incident, Britain passed a law that prohibited all handguns. Just a month after that incident, a man with a semi-automatic rifle murdered thirty-five people in Tasmania. Again, the government leaders in Australia reacted immediately and significantly tightening existing gun laws.<sup>85</sup> While these countries react to gun crises, the political leadership in this country falls back to their rhetoric. An excellent example is what has not happened in the last year. One year ago this nation was on its feet in horror over the incident in Littleton, Colorado, yet still there have been no sweeping changes in this country like the ones seen in other nations. Instead political leaders continue to nibble around the edges of the gun violence issue offering a crumb or two in the form of weak legislation to temporarily quell the angry citizenry following the latest shooting. When a potentially effective law is passed, it faces poor enforcement from both an executive and judicial prospective. Then those in government wait for the next trigger to be pulled so they can repeat this cyclical process.

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<sup>85</sup> "America's Blind Spot." *The Economist*. April 24, 1999., page 16

### **Television, internet and video games**

While the debate over gun control has focused on the Second Amendment, the issue of limiting violent television, video games and internet sites has centered around the First Amendment. Those in favor of limiting a child's ability to view violence have touted thousands of studies pointing to the fact that when children watch violent television (as well as violence in other forms of media) they "are more prone to use physical aggression than those who don't."<sup>86</sup> Those arguing the opposite side of the issue state that it is not what is on the television, but the inability of parents to properly supervise what their children are watching. When political leaders attempt to weigh in on this debate they are often found hovering in the middle between the strength of the First Amendment and the inability to legislate parental supervision.

While guns have been around since this nation was formed, television violence lacks both the same history of existence and clarity of debate. Beyond the First Amendment argument, the problems for those supporting non-violence on television started with the passage of the Federal Communications Act in 1934. This act gave broadcasters free, exclusive use of channels on the condition that they serve the "public

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<sup>86</sup> Rohr, Janelle. Violence in America: Opposing Viewpoints. San Diego, CA: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1990., page 163.

interest, convenience and necessity.”<sup>87</sup> Yet many argue that the interest they have in mind is not the public’s, but rather their own.

Yet despite the language written in the Act, it was not until the 1970s that Congress and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) actually began to openly question this public interest rationale and suggest that broadcasters were not doing an adequate job addressing the public’s needs. By the 1980s however, the FCC did away with its public-interest mandate altogether “declaring that thereafter the marketplace, with its preference for economic efficiency, would determine the public interest.”<sup>88</sup>In fact, the only public interest requirement the FCC has honored since the 1980s has been that broadcasters must air programs that concern issues in their local communities.<sup>89</sup> While these programs do exist, they are often aired at undesirable times and are of poor quality.

While the governmental debate over television violence has primarily been fought through the FCC, the issue did make a brief appearance on the legislative stage. In 1990, Congress passed the Children’s Television Action designed to address concerns about the content of programs aired on television. The law requires all commercial broadcasters to provide “educational and informational programs for

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<sup>87</sup> Minow, Newton N. And Lamay, Craig L. Abandoned in the Wasteland: Children, Television and the First Amendment. New York, N.Y: Hill and Wang, 1995, pg. 4

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, pg. 20

children,”<sup>90</sup> but it does not say how many, how often or even what is meant by “educational and informational.” Additionally, broadcasters often fudge on this requirement by using poor quality or questionably “educational and informational” shows, to say nothing of the fact that these shows are often shown during periods that are not typically child-watching times. Despite its passage, the Act had little support on the national level as it was approved without the signature of President George Bush, who said it violated the First Amendment and that the market should determine what children watch.<sup>91</sup>

In the end, most efforts by non-violence-on-television advocates do degenerate into First Amendment battles between the FCC and the broadcasting industry, which the later usually wins. Like television, the increasing use of the internet and video games by children has brought about a new debate between people who desire to see limitations on the access American young people have to violence in these mediums and those who believe that it is an issue that should be resolved by families and not the government. These conflicts also fall into First Amendment dispute, and ultimately our elected leaders are found to be either fence sitters in this debate or ineffectual in their policies to shield the nation’s children from these forums for violence.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, pg. 10

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, pg. 21

## **Conclusion**

Relatively speaking, the efforts of local, state and federal government leaders to decrease school violence have been dismally poor. The politicians seem to be unwilling or unable to get their arms around the entire issue, instead focusing on bits and pieces. Even when they do decide to address one particular aspect of the issue, like tightening gun control or limiting violence on television, the internet and video games, they still fall way short of making meaningful changes. Those in leadership positions who truly want change are blocked in many ways. A lack of expertise because of the historical division between government and schools plays a part. There is also the vast array of special interest groups with powerful lobbyist filling campaign coffers with plenty of cash and turning the heads of weak political leaders whose primary goal is self-preservation.

Despite these historical and external obstacles, politicians themselves are often the biggest hindrance to real change. Even when a minor victory is achieved and a small step is taken that may reduce the incidence of violence by young people, the politicians spend weeks patting themselves on the back for their success. For many government “leaders,” the real success on these issues is measured by how many column inches they can snag in the newspaper. The President calls for a

summit on school violence, which is exactly what he did six months before. A legislator introduces a tough gun control bill that will never pass, but will ensure a victory in the fall as he campaigns on the bill. Political party leadership announces plans to push for a new initiative to dump money into school violence prevention programs, but has no idea where the money may come from and ultimately the money never does materialize. All of these are examples of things that create great press for the politicians, but no real improvement.

So how can the government have the greatest impact on reducing school violence? First and foremost, realize that while reducing access to guns and television violence is important, the solution rests in the family and the community. Political leaders need to do more to strengthen the environment children grow up in by making neighborhoods safe, providing needed support to struggling families, building a stronger, supportive relationship with educators and through more serious, comprehensive changes in gun control laws and then enforcing them. The government can continue to miss great opportunities to reduce school violence by thinking about violence issues in traditional ways, or they can throw out their myopic views and begin to look at the issue outside the box.



## **Chapter Five: Closing the Schoolhouse Doors to Violence**

While politicians have been ineffective in their efforts to reduce school violence, those actually in the trenches - administrating, working and attending the schools - have designed and implemented a plethora of innovative ideas to quell the level of violence within these educational institutions. Those in government do what they can with this critical issue in order to survive politically, but those committed to the education of children have a stronger, more personal motivation to ensure that schools are safe. This added incentive of being on the front lines creates an almost desperate atmosphere, which leads to a variety of creative solutions. Some ideas fail miserably, while others seem to make a real difference in changing the violent nature of kids and schools.

As mentioned in Chapter One, historically schools dealt with unruly students who created discipline problems by using a firm, often-violent hand. Until the early to mid-twentieth century, the standard practice in addressing violence in schools was for the teachers and administrators to perpetrate violence against the students. These physical punishments in American scholastic history, along with the usually poor physical condition and overcrowded nature of the schools,

only led to increasing disorder and sometimes violence by the students.<sup>92</sup> The last twenty years of the twentieth century have shown an evolution in the thinking by educators around the issue of curbing school violence. As a society, there has been a shift in understanding and a realization that violence begets violence. This has forced educators, and others working with children, to develop innovative approaches in addressing disciplinary problems and reducing violence in children. While there has been modernization in addressing problems with student behavior, some methods have proven more effective than others.

### **Zero Tolerance**

In 1994, the federal government passed the Gun-Free Schools Act, which forced states, and ultimately school boards, to pass laws and develop policies to expel for at least one year a student who brings a weapon to school. Fearing the loss of federal funding, every state passed the requisite laws, and every school district developed policies. The only leniency provision in the act allows school superintendents to adjust the term of expulsions based on the merits of individual cases.<sup>93</sup>

With the passage of this law, the floodgates opened to the development of zero tolerance policies at the school board level on a variety of issues, and definitely not limited to weapons. In an attempt to

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<sup>92</sup> Evolution of School Disturbance in America, chapters 2 and 3

eradicate anything and everything that may cause disharmony in schools, zero tolerance policies have been developed on “toy weapons, plastic knives, Midol tablets, and kissing classmates,”<sup>94</sup> to name a few. These extensions of zero tolerance into areas beyond lethal weapons have been controversial and resulted in situations angering parents and sparking headlines in the media.

While many times a potentially deadly violent incident is averted because a school zero tolerance policy has removed the likely perpetrator from the school, society as a whole more frequently hears about the severe punishment handed down to a child who had no intention of causing harm to teacher or classmate. The following are some examples of the more notorious incidents of excessive uses of the zero tolerance policies:

- Alexandria, La. - a second-grader brought his grandfather’s watch, which had a one-inch pocketknife attached, for show and tell. He was suspended and sent for one month to a local alternative school.
- Columbia, S.C. - a sixth-grader brought a steak knife in her lunch box to cut chicken and asked the teacher if she could use it. Even though she never removed the knife, the police were called, the girl was taken away in a police cruiser and she was suspended and threatened with expulsion.
- Seattle, WA. - a ten-year-old was expelled for bringing a G.I. Joe doll’s one-inch plastic gun to school in his pocket.

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<sup>93</sup> Jones, Rebecca. “Absolute Zero: Do zero-tolerance policies go too far?” *The American School Board Journal*. October, 1997, page 29.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

- Colorado Springs, CO. - a six-year-old shared organic lemon drops with fellow students on the playground and was suspended for possession of “other chemical substances.”
- Manassas, VA. - a nine-year-old boy handed out Certs Concentrated Mints in class, and received a one-day suspension for possession and distribution of “look-alike” drugs and was interviewed by police.<sup>95</sup>

Often the media and student rights groups use these types of incidents to decry the value of zero tolerance policies in schools. Yet as zero tolerance moves into its fifth year of functional use, there is some evidence that the policies do reduce school violence. In Texas, teachers have reported a one third decrease in violent attacks on teachers and students in just the first year of the adoption of zero tolerance policies.<sup>96</sup> When faced with anecdotal evidence that these policies go too far - like the incidents described above - zero tolerance advocates argue that anything less could be a slippery slope and they would rather “follow the better-safe-than-sorry principle.”<sup>97</sup>

Regardless of whether a person favors zero tolerance policies or opposes them, an understanding is emerging on both sides of the issue that follow up is critical. Specifically, following up with those suspended or expelled is vital to the well being of the child and abating the negative impact that child has on his or her community. While school

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<sup>95</sup> Skiba, Russ and Peterson, Reece. “The Dark Side of Zero Tolerance: Can Punishment Lead to Safe Schools?” *Phi Delta Kappan*. January, 1999, page 375.

<sup>96</sup> Jones, Rebecca. “Absolute Zero: Do zero tolerance policies go too far?” *The American School Board Journal*. October, 1997, page 29.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, page 30.

administrators are primarily interested in decreasing the chances of violence in the school, they also want to do everything they can to change a child's behavior and limit the opportunity for violence to spill from the classroom to the street. If a troubled youth is not in a structured environment, then the problems are simply being diverted to the community as a whole.

In this vein, two impressive programs have been developed in Boston, Massachusetts and San Jose, California, which are designed for kids who have been suspended from school for weapons, drugs or other potentially violent incidents. The intent of the programs is to intercede and attempt to diffuse problems that a child is having before they escalate. The Counseling and Intervention Center in Boston is "an intensive, short-term-treatment program that offers group counseling and lessons in conflict resolution."<sup>98</sup> Three different types of interventions are available and the course of action is determined in consultation with parents and social workers. Depending on the type of counseling selected participants are in the program between five and ten days, yet "the center has a low nine percent recidivism rate."<sup>99</sup>

Beginning in 1993, San Jose's Safe Alternative and Violence Education program has offered schools the opportunity to move a student suspended on a weapons charge to an intensive six-hour

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<sup>98</sup> Rosenberg, Debra. "Lessons From the Front." *Newsweek*. June 8, 1998, page 34.

intervention led by police officers. The program focuses on “life-skills” as opposed to being just another “preachy” session on the evils of guns. Since its inception, less than twenty-five percent of all participants in the program have been caught a second time with a weapon.<sup>100</sup>

### **Mediation, Conflict-Resolution and Peer Mediation**

While zero tolerance and follow up to suspensions and expulsions have been successful in hampering violence in schools, many potentially explosive situations can be addressed before they reach the point of removing a child from school. Many problems originate from student to student, or student to teacher, conflicts. School districts around the country are using faculty mediation, conflict resolution and peer mediation as tools to diffuse the friction.

While conflicts occur throughout life and are a normal part of any relationship, it is important to have the skills needed to resolve those conflicts in a non-threatening, harmless manner. The use of mediation to address conflicts was developed in the 1960s and 1970s, and is now used in “about 10,000 schools and community groups”<sup>101</sup> around the country. School administrators believe that the advantage of using mediation is that it teaches their faculty and students the skills of conflict resolution.

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Even though there are many different programs across the country, and there are some variations from school to school, there is a typical formula for creating a mediation program that can be used for teachers and students alike. First, a foundation is set which includes explaining what conflict is, the issues surrounding nonverbal communication and the importance of the reflective listening technique. "After the three foundations of mediation are taught . . . (then there is time) spent on the five steps of mediation: opening, listening, mutual understanding, creating options, and planning."<sup>102</sup> This approach is only slightly modified to work with peer mediation by having the administration and staff work closely with the students, as well as having the peer mediators in pairs as opposed to a single mediator.

The first peer mediation program in the country was developed in 1982 at King High School in Cleveland, Ohio. The Winning Against Violent Environment (WAVE) program has been successful by offering a voluntary program, lasting approximately forty minutes, that allows teens to vent their frustrations with one another in a controlled environment. The structured sessions keep the participants talking until a signed resolution is produced, with specific recommendations that both

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<sup>101</sup> Vail, Kathleen. "Give Peace a Chance." *The American School Board Journal*. August, 1998, page 22.

<sup>102</sup> Jones, Paul L. "Values Education, Violence Prevention, and Peer Mediation: The Triad against Violence in Our Schools." *Educational Horizons*. Summer, 1998, pages 179-180. This article can provide more detailed information on the development of a mediation program, and can more fully describe the three foundations of mediation and the five steps to mediation.

parties must agree to follow. The session concludes with a handshake and a follow up by the mediators a few days later to ensure that solution has been consummated.<sup>103</sup>

Despite the anecdotal success of these programs throughout the country, some skepticism still exists. Little research has been done to confirm the true impact of mediation and conflict resolution programs. While the research is limited, there are a handful of studies that show specific programs are valuable. One example is a 1998 review of the Atlanta Public Schools' Resolving Conflict Creatively Program (RCCP). This study found that there was a reduction in in-school and out-of-school suspensions by thirty-three percent and 17.2 percent respectively. This despite the fact that similar schools without conflict resolution programs were seeing increases in suspensions.<sup>104</sup> Even with limited information and evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs, those who intuitively believe in them have been extremely effective in getting programs implemented. In fact, "conflict resolution training courses are required in sixty one percent of U.S. school districts."<sup>105</sup>

### **Changing the School Environment**

Beyond zero tolerance and conflict resolution, many schools are changing the school environment in drastic ways to reduce the risk of

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<sup>103</sup> Vail, Kathleen. "Give Peace a Chance." *The American School Board Journal*. August, 1998, page 23.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid, page 24.



violence. From beefing up armed security in school buildings to metal detectors at all school entrances, some schools administrators and parents believe that they are being forced by the current climate of fear to turn their schools into miniature prisons. In addition to the normal precautionary measures, some schools have undertaken mandatory locker inspections, checking backpacks as kids enter the building and the occasional use of police dogs.

While all these efforts have some affect on reducing school violence, many educators and psychologists believe it actually adds to a child's frightening experience of attending school. In an effort to offer constructive suggestions on reducing violence in schools through less prison-like practices, experts suggested several options for educators in a 1998 article in the *Education Digest*. The following are a few of those recommendations:

- Create a welcoming and caring environment on campus
- Have a comprehensive school safety plan
- Make nonviolence a part of the curriculum
- Control access
- Provide training for the school staff<sup>106</sup>

There are also variations on these overall themes, and many school districts are able to implement these ideas in different ways. Educators

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<sup>105</sup> Nemecek, Sasha. "Forestalling Violence." *Scientific American*. September, 1998, page 15.

<sup>106</sup> Allen, Tom. "Keep Guns Out of Schools." *Education Digest*. December, 1998, page 27-32. There are several articles and books in the educational literature that offer suggestions and variations on these recommendations for reducing the risk of school violence. This particular article does focus on these five themes and offers additional detail on what the intent of each is and the steps to accomplish them.

are extremely innovative and do not limit themselves to pat or standard ideas.

This innovation has led many larger schools to a new concept that seems to be working: smaller schools. Several studies have shown that the larger the school, the more likely discipline problems and violence will occur. In one research study a comparison was done between large, mid-size and small schools.<sup>107</sup> The data produced by the U.S. Department of Education for the 1996-97 school year showed that larger schools are twenty nine percent more likely to have physical conflicts between students, the students are nearly fifty four percent more likely to verbally abuse the teachers, and sixty five percent more likely to vandalize the school than mid-size schools.<sup>108</sup> To strengthen the point further, when comparing mid-size schools with small schools, there were forty one percent less physical conflicts between students and forty-two percent fewer acts of vandalism on school property in the small schools compared to the mid-sized schools.<sup>109</sup>

Patterson High School in Baltimore, Maryland used to be a living validation of the data presented above. A high school with 2,000 students, chaos, disharmony and violence were a way of life for the

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<sup>107</sup> For this situation, a large school is any that has more than 1,000 students and a mid-size school has 300 to 999 students, and small schools were those with less than 300 students.

<sup>108</sup> Bushweller, Kevin. "Probing the roots and prevention of youth violence." *Educational Vital Signs*. December, 1998, page A9.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid, page A12.

students and teachers. In 1995, the school radically changed both its educational focus and physical structure to create a “Ninth Grade Success Academy . . . and five upper-level Career Academies.”<sup>110</sup> The six academies have between 250 and 350 students each in an isolated section of the building with separate entrances and focused learning in specific career tracks. There is also a separate alternative program for disciplinary problem students called the Twilight School, which provides short-term coursework and counseling until the staff feels the students can return to their appropriate academy.<sup>111</sup>

Not only does the outward appearance of the school reflect a safe and educational environment, but the teachers and students are positively responding to changes. Ninety percent of the teachers believe the school provides a learning environment now compared to only fifteen percent feeling that way before the changes. Additionally, under the previous structure, there was a continuous ten percent absentee rate among teachers and forty to fifty percent among students; now the teachers have a nearly one hundred percent attendance rate and the students average eighty percent daily. One the most encouraging statistics since the change is reflected in the academic success of the students. Prior to the change, only thirty five percent of the ninth grade

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<sup>110</sup> McPartland, James, et al. “Finding Safety in Small Numbers.” *Educational Leadership*. October, 1997, page 14.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid, page 16.

students received enough credits at the end of the year to move on to tenth grade. Now that figure is at eighty percent.<sup>112</sup> Just this information alone can point to the fact that smaller can be better.

### **Educating the Educators**

One of the biggest mistakes made by school districts is failing to properly educate their faculty on what to look for in a child that would be a warning sign or a symptom of impending violent behavior. Many people believe that just because teachers have been taught how to teach, they inherently can determine a potentially dangerous child or situation. Even schools who hire “school security officers” as added protection, may find that these supposed professionals have little or no training in how to either identify a possible tinder box on the verge of explosion or how to diffuse and contain one that has already detonated.

In fact, when looking at just school security officers, there are several key points to keep in mind when hiring and training these individuals. First, many are hired, not for their skills, but because they have a friend in the school administration, have a background as a security guard or bouncer, or simply may be large and appear imposing. Many of these individuals do not have the skills or experiences necessary to handle the difficult job of dealing with potentially dangerous children.

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid, page 17.

The following is a list of recommendations from the *American School Board Journal* on what school districts should look for when hiring a school security officer:

- Knowledge of criminal and school law, and how they interrelate
- An understanding of what is permissible for search-and-arrest procedures
- Possession of self-defense skills
- Training in first aid and CPR
- Understand crime prevention through a comprehensive safety control of the school grounds
- Familiarity with hostage situations, bomb threats and confiscation of weapons
- Ability to handle disturbed and aggressive people
- Basics of criminal investigation
- Steps taken in case of a hazardous materials incident<sup>113</sup>

Although this may seem excessive for someone who is supposed to just wander the halls and keep the peace, with the changing school environment all of these skills are necessary and unfortunately frequently used.

While it is important to have the security officers properly trained in case a problem occurs, it is even more critical to have those on the front lines with the students prepared to both identify a potential problem and deal with one if it happens. Teachers are the most important assets in diminishing school violence, because they have intense, persistent contact with their students. Often following a school shooting or other violent incident at a school, many people, including the

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<sup>113</sup> Hylton, J. Barry. "Know-How: for school security officers, the right training is the key to crime prevention." *The American School Board Journal*. April, 1996, page 46.

teachers, will say that they had no idea this student would commit a serious act of violence. However, on closer examination most, if not all, of the incidents of violent deaths in schools were perpetrated by students who exhibited several of the early warning signs of violence. The lack of recognition was caused by a lack of educating the teachers.

Part of the problem lies with school districts, which close their eyes to the possibility of violence. The administration feels they know their students and schools so well that they do not believe something terrible could happen. So they do not prepare their teachers for the possibility. The reality, however, is that in the 1997-98 school year, almost one million students in this country brought a gun to school.<sup>114</sup>

To combat these concerns, the U.S. Department of Education has provided schools with sixteen “behavioral and emotional signs” that indicate a student may turn to violence, and are encouraging school administrators to educate their teachers on these signs. The list includes the following:

- Social withdrawal
- Excessive feelings of isolation and being alone
- Excessive feelings of rejection
- Being a victim of violence
- Feelings of being picked on and persecuted
- Low school interest and poor academic performance
- Expression of violence in writings and drawings
- Uncontrolled anger
- Patterns of impulsive and chronic hitting
- History of discipline problems

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<sup>114</sup> “Survey: 1 Million Students Took Guns to School in '97.” *Reuters*. June 19, 1998.

- Past history of violent and aggressive behavior
- Intolerance for differences and prejudicial attitudes
- Drug and alcohol use
- Affiliation with gangs
- Inappropriate access to, possession of, and use of firearms
- Serious threats of violence<sup>115</sup>

These are just the “early” warning signs, and it is unwise to look at this list and say a child has one of these and therefore he or she will be violent. However, if a teacher, administrator or parent encounters a child with one or more of these signs, then it is time for action to be taken. The section above that outlined tactics for mediation may be an appropriate starting point. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Education also offered “imminent” warning signs that should be considered as the immediate precursors to violence. These include: “serious fighting, property destruction, unexplained bouts of rage, threats of suicide or detailed threats of lethal violence.”<sup>116</sup>

Finally, it is important to prepare teachers and faculty – not just the school security officers – to handle an incident should it happen. While it is unlikely that an incident like those describe in Chapter Three will happen, planning for the worst is better than being left unprepared in the event something drastic should occur. Additionally, lesser forms of violence do occur on a regular basis in schools across the nation and

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<sup>115</sup> Denenberg, Tia Schneider, et al. “Reducing Violence in U.S. Schools.” *Dispute Resolution Journal*. November, 1998, page 31.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

teachers need to be prepared to handle them. Programs and information are available in training teachers on how to address violent situations.<sup>117</sup>

### **Michigan Schools React**

So far in this chapter there has been a focus on what can be done by school administrations and faculty to reduce violence. One of the most basic steps in this process is changing of school policies. In an effort to bring some original research to this thesis, a survey was conducted of Michigan school superintendents on their policies relating to school violence (a copy of the survey can be found in Appendix A). The survey, mailed in November, 1999, was only sent to public school districts with 5,000 students or more. This represents only seventy-one school districts out of more than 500, but encompasses nearly fifty percent of the students in public education in Michigan during the 1997-98 school year. Of the seventy-one surveys sent out, fifty-three – or 74.6% – returned them completed.

The first goal of the survey was to identify if school policies on violence changed between the 1995-96 and 1998-99 school years. If they were updated or added, the survey was designed to identify what policies were changed and what or who were the motivating factors behind the

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<sup>117</sup> A good starting point for school districts interested in providing training to teachers on dealing with violent incidents is the following article: Gavin, Thomas A. "Young Guns: Do your school employees know what to do when a kid brings a gun to school?" *The American School Board Journal*. April, 1996, page 40-42. Mr. Gavin is a lieutenant with the Youth Resources Section of the St. Petersburg, Florida Police Department and runs a private consulting firm called School Safety Consultants, Inc.



changes. Finally, the survey asked about violent deaths, how many there had been and what weapon was used.

Of the fifty-three respondents, only one district had not changed its policies on school violence. This meant that 98.1% of the districts had changed their policies on school violence. When asked what policies were changed, 83% identified “threats of violent acts” as the policy changed, 64.2% altered their policies on “zero tolerance on guns,” and 58.5% made some adjustments to how they handle “disciplinary action for fights.” The policy least changed was on gang activity, having been updated or added in only 30.2% of the districts during the four-year period. While administrators and school boards are addressing school violence in many ways, clearly they recognized that the “threat” of violence is something that must be focused upon quickly before it escalates into action.

Additionally, there were some interesting findings when the superintendents were asked about the “motivating factor” in making these changes. While the top response was the administration as the motivating factor at 64.2%, a surprising second was “recent well-publicized events in schools around the country” at 52.8%. This is an indication that the fear created by the media and the perception of violence in schools is impacting decision-making regarding violence policies in Michigan school districts. Yet, when looking at the response

for the same question, only three districts, or 5.7%, stated that “violent events in (their) district” was a factor in making changes to violence policies.

Finally, the survey found that despite the concern expressed across the nation regarding the violent deaths experienced in the schools, there was only one reported violent death on school property in the districts responding during the four-year period from the 1995-96 school year to the 1998-99 school year. While one is still too many, it is statistically very small.<sup>118</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Clearly much is being done by those in education to attempt to reduce the risk of violence in schools. From the development of new policies to the implementation of innovative conflict resolution programs, educators, for the most part, are taking on the challenge of improving the school environment. While the successes are sometimes slow, when success is achieved it makes a world of difference in the lives of the students, the educators and the community. However, it is vital that all schools avoid complacency and not turn a blind eye to the potential of violence. While it may never happen in your school district, steps should still be taken to reduce the chances of the improbable.

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<sup>118</sup> Charts on data received through this survey can be found in Appendix B

## **Conclusion**

There is no denying that American society has contained a violent nature from the earliest arrival of colonists to this continent through present day. It is a violence that has permeated virtually every corner of American life, not just the adult population, but also our youth. Some characteristics of youth violence are not uniquely societal, but are related to the experiences and environment of an individual's childhood. Preventable lifestyle situations alter the psyche of a child and push them into a higher risk level of violence.

Just as violence exists in American society and within the childhoods of American children, it is also brought into the American school system. In some cases the brutality seen in schools is limited to pushing, shoving and fistfights on the playgrounds, while increasingly these schoolhouse conflicts end in situations like the bloody killings discussed in Chapter Three. Some where during their lives, these youthful killers have encountered events, circumstances and individual conditions that have altered their lives from being no different than their peers at birth to being a cold blooded killer.

So who has the "silver bullet" to solve the school violence problem? It is certainly not the elected political leadership in this country. They have fought each other to see who can make the biggest noise to support

their own cause while having little impact on changing things in the school. They have neither the skills nor the political backbone to address this crisis in any meaningful way.

School administrators, teachers, parents and others responsible for providing the education have had limited success. They continue to educate themselves, the community and the students in an effort to reduce school violence. Programs have been developed within the schools to both prevent violence there and to deal with it when it happens. Yet the problems persist, and in some cases we find the type of violence to be more brutal and deadly than it has ever been.

The real solution to the issue of school violence is not one program, law or policy developed by one entity acting upon the school system. The “silver bullet” to ending school violence, or at least reducing it significantly, comes from a comprehensive, coordinated effort on all those individuals and groups that could make a difference on this issue. Instead of the schools, community groups, politicians, parents and students working on their own solutions separately, these stakeholders must come together, put aside their own desire for authority and power, and make the changes necessary to protect our kids. It can be done, it simply requires the will of the American society.

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# **Appendix A**

(Survey and Items Sent to  
Superintendents)

Remember when you were in graduate school and needed help to complete a critical paper or project. Someone came to your aid and those efforts made a difference. Because you were an educational success then, you have achieved career success today.

Now you have the opportunity to return the favor and take a few minutes of your time to help out a graduate student who wants to succeed. Please do not throw this away, but make a difference.

November  
Twelve  
1999

Dear Superintendent:

I am a graduate student at the University of Michigan-Flint working in the Masters in Liberal Studies in American Culture program. I am currently working on my thesis which focuses on violence in schools, and more specifically on violent death. As part of this thesis I am attempting to do some original research, surveying school superintendents in Michigan on current school violence policies and violent deaths.

Enclosed is a very brief, two-page, six-question survey. This survey is only being sent to districts with at least 5,000 students. You are only one of approximately seventy-five superintendents to receive this survey. It is vital to the success of my project that you take just a moment from your busy schedule to complete it and return it to me in the enclosed pre-paid envelope.

Since this project is in its final stage, I am requesting your response by November 19, 1999. All responses will be confidential, and the information gathered will only be used in the aggregate form. If there is anything that I can do to facilitate the completion of this survey, or if you have any questions regarding this research, please feel free to contact me at my office during the day at (810) 762-4403, or at home in the evening at (810) 953-0902.

Thank you in advance for your valuable comments, and I look forward to receiving your survey by November 19<sup>th</sup>.

Sincerely,

Bruce A. Trevithick

# Survey on School Violence and Violence Policies In Michigan School Districts

1. Has your school district changed, amended or updated policies on school violence since the 1995-96 school year?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

2. If your district's policies on school violence have changed, what areas have been affected by these changes (check all that apply)?

\_\_\_\_\_ Zero tolerance on guns

\_\_\_\_\_ Disciplinary action for fights

\_\_\_\_\_ Gang activity

\_\_\_\_\_ Threats of violent acts

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

3. Who or what was the motivating factor in making these changes (check all that apply)?

\_\_\_\_\_ School Board

\_\_\_\_\_ Parents

\_\_\_\_\_ Faculty

\_\_\_\_\_ Students

\_\_\_\_\_ Administration

\_\_\_\_\_ Recent well-publicized events in schools around the country

\_\_\_\_\_ Violent events in your own district

\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please describe) \_\_\_\_\_

4. Have violent deaths occurred on school property in your school district between the 1995-96 and 1998-99 school years? (if the answer is NO, skip to the optional section on page 2)

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

If so, how many? \_\_\_\_\_

**Page 2 OVER** 

## 5. What were the causes of these deaths?

Number	Cause
_____	Suicide
_____	Gang Activity
_____	Student on Student
_____	Student on Teacher
_____	Non-student on Student or Teacher

## 6. For all non-suicide deaths, what weapon was used?

Number	Weapon
_____	Gun
_____	Knife
_____	Bomb
_____	Blunt instrument (e.g. pipe, bat)
_____	Fist, hands, arms, legs, etc.
_____	Rope
_____	Other (please describe) _____

Thank you for your time and effort in responding to this survey. If you wish to be notified of the results of this survey, please check this box: \_\_\_\_\_.

**Optional:**

Superintendent Name/Person Completing Survey \_\_\_\_\_

School District Name \_\_\_\_\_ Phone \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

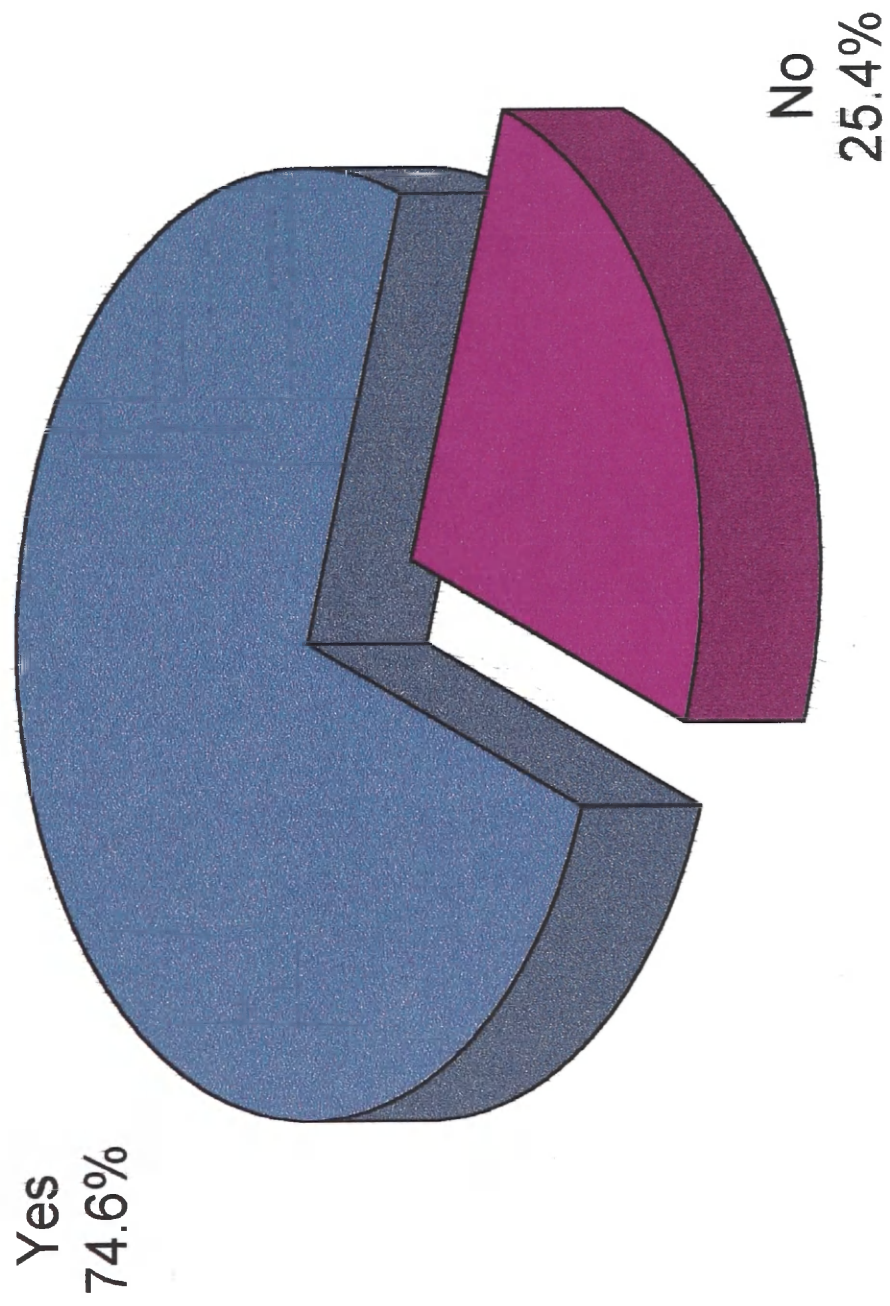
**All Information is CONFIDENTIAL, and school name and the person's name who completed the survey is only used for internal tracking purposes.**

# **Appendix B**

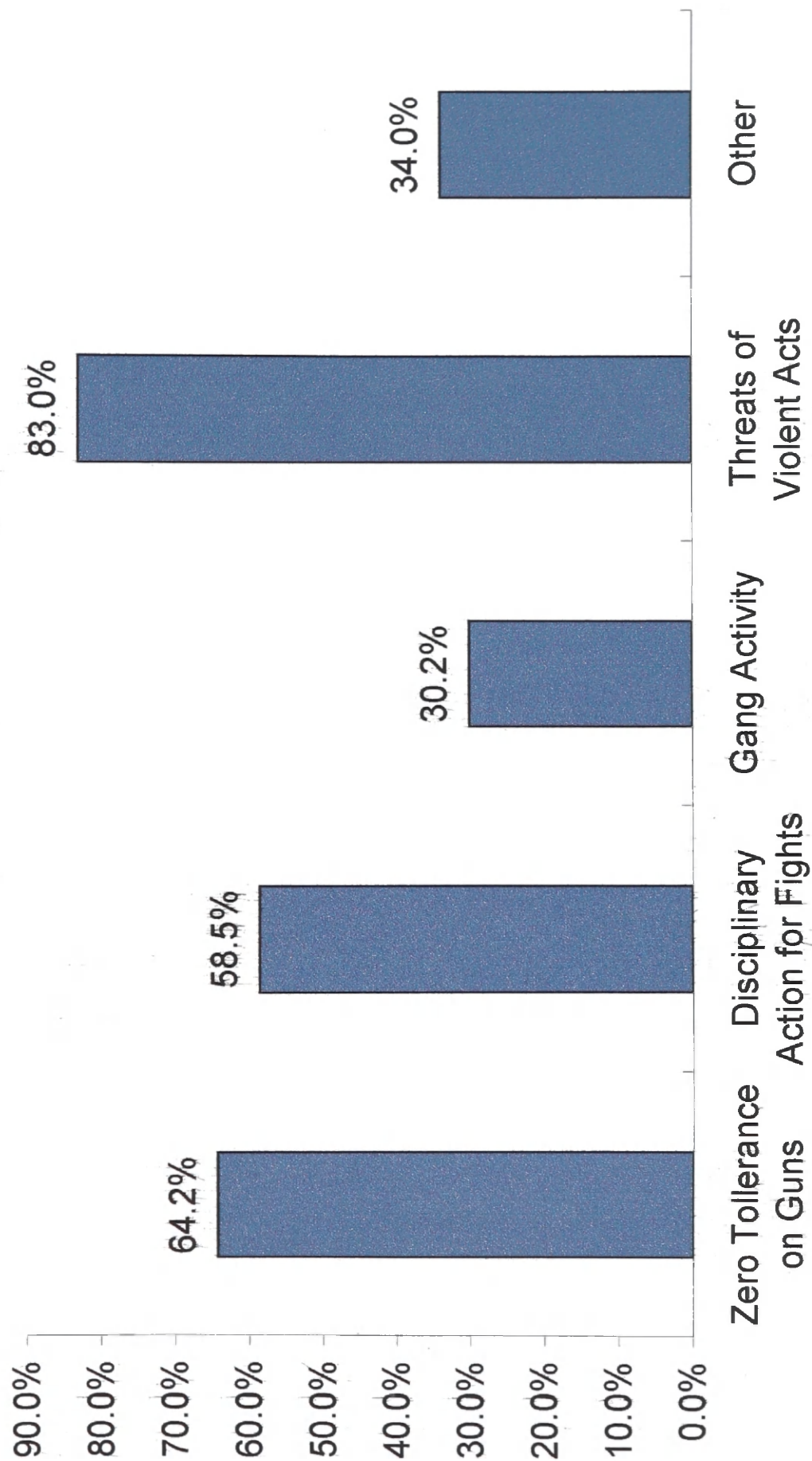
(Charts on Survey Results)



## Percentage of Districts Surveyed that Returned Surveys



Percentage of School Violence Policies Changed by Type of Policy  
from 1995-96 School Year to 1998-99 School Year



# Motivating Factors for Changing School Violence Policies % of School Districts Citing These Factors

